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TREVANNION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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CALL TO THE SWAN

BELLES LETTRES

COMMON SENSE ABOUT POETRY
COMMON SENSE ABOUT DRAMA
THE MINSTREL BOY
ENGLISH FOR PLEASURE
JOHN MCCORMACK

TREVANNION

by

L. A. G. STRONG



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TO
HEATHER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In case anyone should be disappointed, it must be confessed that no exploration of our coastline will discover Dycer's Bay, no probing of our hills Newton St. Bastable. Both places, like their inhabitants, are imaginary.

I

IT WAS a fine, shiny morning. The starlings whistled and clicked and preened themselves. Even the drab unrenovated houses of Dycer's Bay seemed to swim, enchanted, in the mild spring air.

The sunlight blessed everything. It made the portly form of Trevannion seem larger than life as he came down the road, and turned his advance into a progress. It gave a breadth to his movements, a magnificence to his demeanour. An acquaintance of his, who frequented the same tavern, had once described this demeanour as 'off-stately'; the qualification justified, perhaps, by a certain seediness in his clothes, and something assumed, rather than native, in his manner. But to-day there was no qualification. Although the sunlight on his clothing showed clearly signs of wear and measures taken to conceal them, the whole effect was one of dignity. Even the worn black Gladstone bag took on a benign appearance, as if at any moment he might plunge in a regal hand and scatter largesse.

'Ah, Purvis!'

He raised a hand in greeting, and Mr. Purvis the butcher, standing in his doorway, felt as pleased as if the twenty-eight shillings Trevannion owed him were paid and a further two pounds lodged in credit.

Passing opposite Messrs. Murrough, family grocer and wholesale importer of teas, wines, and spirits, Trevannion saluted Mr. Murrough, who had come out to inspect the display in his window and make signs to the assistant who was arranging it, and Mr. Murrough turned red with pleasure, then felt aggrieved because the assistant was not looking.

'Lovely mornin', Mr. Trevannion.'

The town porter, pushing his barrow, checked, in hope that Trevannion would stop and have a word with him. Trevannion stopped. Apparently considering the matter for

the first time, he looked round and gave the morning his attention.

'It is indeed, Boocock,' he pronounced, in a rich baritone. 'It is indeed.'

And the porter, nodding delightedly to have his view confirmed, bent down again and grasped the handles with a new zest.

It was so all the way down the road. People either spoke to Trevannion, saluted him, or looked at him out of doorways and windows. The looks varied in enthusiasm; there was perhaps here and there a note of reservation in the greetings; but everyone noticed him, down to the children playing hopscotch or peevers on the pavement. A personage of consequence in Dycer's Bay was passing.

For that matter, Trevannion would have drawn attention anywhere. A big man, heavily built, close on sixty, with a florid complexion, bold, rather fleshy features and a large brown moustache, he had under his deliberate movements a hint of physical vitality that could still make women look, thoughtfully after him. Three parts of his dress was formal, its seediness offset by the informality of the rest; as if he were not troubling to complete in any orthodox way the style to which he was accustomed, but would do so as soon as he got home; as if, for the moment, he were permitting himself a little Bohemian relaxation.

It would be very difficult to place him. One guess might be the baritone of a travelling opera company, who had stepped down the road to buy a paper. Another, the proprietor of a restaurant coming back from market. Yet each guesser would remain dissatisfied, worried by the mixture of seediness and stability, between the licence of the impresario and the dignity of a learned profession, maybe medicine, or the law.

Just as Trevannion was approaching the turning into Hawker Street, where he lodged, a young man on a bicycle with a butcher's basket in front careered out into the main street, whistling shrilly, and scattering three or four pigeons which were strutting and pecking near the kerb. Seeing Trevannion, he slowed down by the simple expedient of

putting his feet on the ground, straddled^d right across the road, and pulled up with his basket a foot ~~from~~ Trevannion's waistcoat.

Startled from his meditations, Trevannion backed a step.

‘Ah, Stanley. Boisterous! Boisterous!’

The young man was too happy to hear the note of rebuke.

‘I got a fight, Trev! Mr. Trevannion, I mean. I got a fight!’

He looked as if he had had several. His pleasant, pink, flat face was made flatter than ever by a badly broken nose, and his left ear was a shapeless curl of flesh, like a crisp, thick rasher. His blue eyes were so deep-set that one could not tell whether the surrounding puffiness was natural or made worse by blows.

But there was nothing brutalised about him. An aura of pure goodness, a radiance of simple delight came from him, as, crimson, grinning, he beamed upon Trevannion.

‘A fight, Stanley? Where?’

‘Tuesday fortnit. Corn Exchange.’

‘And—ah—your opponent?’

‘Sid Prodger. But there's more to it than that. Mr. Trevannion—what d'you think!’

‘I have no idea, Stanley. No idea at all.’

‘If I do Sid, I'm to have a go at Sailor Berridge. And if I beats the Sailor——’

He paused dramatically, eyeing Trevannion.

‘Yes, Stanley?’

‘If I can beat the Sailor——’ his grin broadened, to be replaced with a look almost of awe——‘then Gus says he'll match me with—who d'you think?—Young Woodlock.’

‘Young Woodlock?’

Trevannion looked blank, but Stanley was too full of his news to see.

‘I couldn't 'ardly believe my ears when Gus tells me. “Young Woodlock?” I says. “Why,” I says, “You can't mean it,” I says. “I do,” 'e says, and puts 'is arm round my shoulder. “I do, Stan boy,” 'e says. “Only you got to beat them other two first.”’

'And can you, do you think?'

The narrow blue eyes clouded. Then the grin reappeared.

'I can 'ave a good try.'

Trevannion nodded.

'That's the spirit,' he said, without conviction. 'And— you are pleased with this arrangement?'

'Pleased! 'Course I'm pleased. I was afraid Gus was done with me, after that lacin' I took from Frankie Higgs.'

'You certainly were not at your best on that occasion.'

'E must a changed 'is mind, though. I wonder what made 'im change it. Must a seen me in the gym.'

'Who is it you say has arranged these fights for you?'

'Gus. Gus Vupsey. The promoter. You know. Owns the Premier 'All at Frillingham.'

Trevannion cleared his throat.

'I don't want to discourage you, Stanley, or put you out of conceit with yourself. But I would counsel you to scrutinise very closely any form of contract offered to you by —ah—that person. To take advice upon the legal import, You have a manager?'

'Not reely. Old Ted—'e looks after me.'

'I trust he is experienced. As I say, the last thing I wish to do is to discourage you in any way. But——'

Stan's ingenuous face showed concern. He squared his shoulders.

'It'll be all right. Old Ted'll see me right. Anyway, Gus is the boss. I got to take it or leave it. It'll be all right.'

'I trust so, for your sake, Stanley, I am sure. Well—good morning to you.'

Trevannion walked on, leaving the young man looking after him doubtfully. His elation had gone. He frowned, his mouth puckering like a baby's in his perplexity. He watched the stately figure cross the road and enter Hawker Street. Stan muttered to himself, his eyes on Trevannion's broad back until it disappeared. Then, with a jerk, he swung his long legs, levering the bicycle forward as if on a giant stride, and pedalled off whistling.

Dycer's Bay was an anachronism, an anomaly, a small seaside town which had neither expanded nor developed for close on fifty years.

This resistance to the march of progress was due to an unusual combination of circumstances. The town lay all by itself. It was not on the way to anywhere, and, once you reached it, you could not get anywhere else without going back the way you had come. It lay at the end of a branch line eleven miles long, to which the railway company had never needed to add a second track. The only road to the town ran five and a half miles, with no side roads other than those that led to an odd farm or two, and, on the outskirts of the town, to the headquarters of its single industry, now moribund, a place for working the china clay drawn from a hill-side thirteen miles inland.

A hundred years earlier, this industry had been prosperous, and the mail and passenger boat known locally as 'the packet' had called twice a week at the small harbour. Then the gradual silting-up of the estuary and the discovery of newer and better methods of working china clay had robbed the town of its vitality and its importance. The townsfolk had no chance of developing it into a resort. Few visitors came: there was nothing to attract them. The harbour was obsolescent, the foreshore at low tide consisted of mud and a few weedy rocks. Even had visitors come, there was hardly anywhere to put them. The land on either side of the town, and for miles inland, was privately owned, part of a large estate upon which the owner would allow no building other than the cottages needed for his servants and retainers.

Thus the town was physically unable to spread in any direction. The only way to build a new house or shop was to pull down whatever structure was there already. Two or three modern shops, each a branch of an ubiquitous multiple store, stood in shameful garishness at the extreme east end of the town: and the conduct of the citizen who so far forgot himself as to sell them a space which his shrunken business could no longer use earned him such execration that he had to live somewhere else. Dycer's Bay, deprived of both

the means and the initiative to expand, remained an island, static, unstirred, in the last stages, now, of its slow decay.

These restrictions had their effect on the inhabitants. From lamenting their isolation they had come to cherish and be proud of it. The young people tended to leave in search of their proper century, and the gaps were filled with the elderly, the eccentric, and those who hated modern ways and clung to the past. There was little money in the town. The china clay was still worked, unprofitably, and there was no other industry beyond the making of such outmoded articles as its people still used and looked for. The town kept an Edwardian, almost a Victorian atmosphere. The furniture of the few hotels and lodging-houses was of a kind hardly to be found elsewhere. In the small and dingy windows of the shops were displayed ladies' garments which had long since disappeared, save from a few still catering for aged eccentrics in the corners of Kensington and a back lane or two in Buxton. Travellers of mature years, who somehow had occasion to visit Dycer's Bay, often underwent an emotional convulsion, as if their childhood days had been resurrected and, like Lazarus, smelt of the tomb. There was no charm of the antique there, none of those graces from an earlier life which one finds, for example, in Brixham, or Clovelly, or St. Just-in-Roseland. It showed instead the recognisable beginnings of our era, seedy, and decayed.

Yet all this industrial and architectural stagnation did not mean that the place was dead. Its inhabitants were very much alive. A curious collection, unified by their queerness, just numerous enough to make a poor but self-supporting community, they had as few dealings as they could with the world outside. Frillingham, the large resort a few miles farther down the coast, the parvenu which at an earlier stage had drawn visitors and custom that might otherwise have come to Dycer's Bay, they agreed to despise and ignore. On the other hand, they recognised one town, Basden, fourteen miles inland, where the boxing promoter lived who had offered Stan his engagements. To this town the people of Dycer's Bay might go without loss of self respect. They were even permitted to bring back from a shopping expedition

the products of the outside world, such imports being excused on the ground that, as long as one could get them from Basden, there was no need for the emporia of Dycer's Bay to desecrate their shelves. Thus the indulgence of one's few modern yearnings became a virtue, helping to keep unsullied the spirit of older days: and everyone was satisfied.

Hearing how Dycer's Bay was embedded in the past, collectors and dealers in antiques would descend hopefully upon it, but find little to repay them for the journey. Such furniture and ornaments as they discovered were not old enough to be valuable. They were merely ugly, inconvenient, banal, or impossibly solid. What was more, hardly any of them were for sale. They were in active use. The people liked them, needed them, and had no wish to replace them with anything more modern.

So, in the course of decades, Dycer's Bay had become a freak town, a refuge, an Alsatia for those who disliked their period or had other reasons for wishing to escape from it. Besides these refugees, it had a basic population of natives too poor, too unenterprising, too apathetic to leave it. But the place was not dead. A failure in productiveness, a depleted vitality do not necessarily make people less interesting: and the conditions described, the uniquely archaic set-up of Dycer's Bay, were held by certain of its more reflective inhabitants to exhibit character with a clarity not to be seen elsewhere. Those quirks and impulses which were stifled in the rush of modern life could show in the still airs of such a backwater. As if through an old-fashioned stereoscope, human nature could be seen vividly, in three dimensions. And although oddity can often be a mask obscuring the true character, yet a way of life which allows external gestures full play can release unconscious movements and show what is going on beneath.

3

Approaching Number 14, Hawker Street, Trevannion turned down an alley leading to a lane behind the narrow, unsightly houses. There were no gardens to the houses, but each had a narrow strip of ground, neither garden nor area,

sufficient to hold a clothes-line and such empty crates, boxes or tins as the owner saw fit to eject.

Pushing open the blistered, peeling door in the wall, Trevannion entered this strip. Something of his stateliness had left him. A hint of caution, a flicker of his heavy eyelids suggested one who expects to be barked at suddenly by a dog. As he came in, he glanced quickly up at the windows. His landlady was not to be seen.

Stepping carefully to avoid a garbage can not big enough for what was consigned to it, Trevannion went up a flight of broken stone steps that led to the first floor. Sounds at once sour and militant, an obscure rattling and bumping, told him that Mrs. Wishart was busy below stairs. Moving nimbly and silently, he crossed the landing and tiptoed up the stairs, long experience telling him where to tread so that they hardly creaked.

Trevannion was not afraid of his landlady. He had no cause to be, for his rent was punctually paid. But she was a sharp-tempered, unpleasant woman, and she disliked him : and he was sensitive to dislike. Mrs. Wishart disapproved of anyone coming in by the front door in the morning. In addition to keeping it bolted, she left a number of obstacles in the hall, buckets, iron umbrella stand, rolled mats, to impede any lodger who might disregard her wishes.

The landing was dark. Such light as reached it came through a window covered with paper to imitate stained glass, and had also to pass the remains of a bead curtain. This monstrosity even the wrath of Mrs. Wishart had not wholly preserved from her two small daughters and the attacks of a thin and hungry cat, which spent a watchful life in and out of the house. The cat was prone to attack the beads at any time, and Trevannion had encouraged it, by placing pieces of bacon rind and other titbits high up on the curtain, where the cat must leap and claw to get them. Mrs. Wishart had not yet discovered this stratagem, but her instinct connected Trevannion with the damage, increasing the suspicion with which she viewed him.

Entering his room, Trevannion blew out his cheeks, and looked around. Nothing had been disturbed. He put his

bag down on the table, threw his hat on a chair, stood for a moment stroking his moustache, then crossed to the small mirror and inspected himself, critically pulling down his left lower eyelid.

'H'm,' he said: then straightened up, rubbed his hands, and went to an old Spanish mahogany secretary. This was the one decent piece of furniture in the room, its battered grace contrasting with the iron bedstead, the wash-basin and ewer, the horsehair chair, the plain deal table with the cheap green-spotted cloth. Trevannion had picked it up in past satisfaction of a debt. It gave an air to the side of the room where it stood; it hinted at past opulence: and both its drawers and the polished glacis above them—which opened outwards on a hinge and, resting on two arms pulled out at the sides, became a desk—could be kept locked, to the greater safety and secrecy of anything he put inside.

The upper part of the secretary consisted of a bookcase with glass doors, in which reposed three or four fat medical books, a couple of popular works on law, a directory, a single-volume encyclopaedia, and a few smaller volumes.

Trevannion looked closely at the keyholes, as if expecting to find they had been tampered with. Seeing no evidence of this, he groped in his belly pocket, and pulled out a chain, at the end of which hung an enormous bunch of keys. Choosing the largest, he inserted it in the keyhole of the sloping lid, opened it, and took out a fat volume resembling a cash book, secured by a rubber band. Closing the secretary, but not locking it, he sat down at the table, took from another pocket a spectacle-case like a small coffin, and proceeded to breathe on the spectacles, and polish them attentively with a large yellow silk handkerchief, before putting them on his nose.

He then opened the black Gladstone bag, and took from it close on two dozen letters. Two were addressed to him by name, post restante: the rest bore box numbers at the Post Office, and at an accommodation address.

Drawing from his inner breast pocket a thin ivory knife, Trevannion slit open the envelopes. Some contained postal orders, others stamps. The contents of each he noted

carefully in the fat book, with the date and the address from which the accompanying letter was written. One or two entries seemed to give him satisfaction, others cause for thought. The entire process he discharged methodically, with the concentration of a commercial traveller writing up his orders at the end of the day.

Not until the last entry was made did he set about answering his correspondents. The letters had been sorted into three heaps, and it was apparent that for the present Trevannion was dealing only with those that needed short replies. Even so, certain of these obliged him to go to his secretary, open a couple of drawers, and take out small objects which were to be enclosed. These objects varied in shape from small flat packets to pill-boxes, and Trevannion had a stock of envelopes to fit them.

The writing of these letters, the insertion of the enclosures, the careful licking of the flaps, and the affixing of stamps—he knew exactly how much to put on—occupied an hour and a half. At the end of it, Trevannion put the finished letters in his bag, locked away the others with the fat book in his secretary, went to the chest of drawers that served him as a dressing-table, and proceeded to smarten himself up.

He washed his hands at the wash-stand, clicking his tongue at the discovery of a spider in the jug, and paid great attention to his finger-nails, going under each with the stem of a match. He pomaded his hair, brushing it across the bald spot on his crown. He brushed his moustache. Finally, he went to a cupboard against the wall, and, removing his black alpaca coat, put on instead a morning coat of antique cut but cloth so good as to be almost indestructible. He gave his shoes the flick of a duster, put a handkerchief in his breast pocket, squared his shoulders, cleared his throat, picked up a scarred malacca cane, and left his room, closing the door behind him.

The grace and flourish of his exit was impaired by the sudden appearance of Mrs. Wishart. The landlady stood in a doorway, surveyed him sourly, then looked away.

‘Someone called for yer,’ she observed to the banisters.

'Oh, Mrs. Wishart? When?'

'Soon after yer went. Arst where 'e could find yer. Tole 'im I didn't know where yer was. "Later in the day, now," I says, "you wouldn't 'ave no trouble to find 'im."'

'The caller was a gentleman, then?'

'As yer might say.'

'Did he leave a message?'

'Said 'e'd look in again.'

'I wish you had let me know earlier, Mrs. Wishart.'

'Wouldn't 'ave made no odds. 'E 'asn't come, 'as 'e? Bê-sides, no part o' my business, 'angin' about waitin' on when you chooses to come in. Got me work to do.'

'Yes, well—thank you, Mrs. Wishart. Ah—did the gentleman leave any name?'

'Antrum, or Tantrum, or somethin'.' She paused: then, eyeing Trevannion closely, she added, 'I reckon 'e was a solicitor.'

If she expected him to show surprise, or any other emotion, she was disappointed.

'Antrum,' he repeated. 'Or Tantrum. No. I don't know anybody with a name at all resembling that. And a solicitor, you think.' He raised his head, and smiled. 'Possibly he comes to tell me that someone has left me a fortune, Mrs. Wishart, eh?'

She looked at him sardonically.

'That'd be a change,' she said; and withdrew, shutting the door.

By himself, Trevannion stood absolutely still, his head forward, attentive, pointing like a large dog. His broad frame seemed poised, wary, light on its feet, with an animal alertness. For four or five seconds he stood motionless, as if listening for a danger.

Then, drawing a deep breath, he braced back his shoulders, and went out to the little platform at the top of the steps. There he pulled out a case, ceremoniously lit a cigar, and set off down the steps to call on Miss Balgannon.

II

MISS ELLEN Balgannon had lived at 'The Beeches' since the death of her parents, which happened nine years before the morning of Trevannion's call. A small semi-detached house, it differed from its other half by having a wicket gate, labelled 'Tradesmen's Entrance', about six feet from the front gate. No tradesman or messenger boy ever bothered to use the wicket, to Miss Balgannon's grief. Indeed, for months now it had suffered from a stiffness in the hinge, making it almost impossible to open. Miss Balgannon had several times said to Newton, her maid, that they really must have it put right; but somehow she had not yet given the order.

'The Beeches' occupied altogether about an eighth of an acre. It had a small, neat front garden, with a plot of grass, a circular bed containing four standard rose-trees, and a border devoted mostly to stocks. The nearest beech tree stood three-quarters of a mile away, in the People's Gardens.

Miss Balgannon was not expecting a visitor on that fine spring morning, or on any morning. Few people called on her, except, now and then, the Rector, or her energetic friend, Mrs. Bracegirdle. She led a retired life, subsisting on what her parents would have termed a modest competence. Old in her manner, set in her timid ways, she could not interest the few young people in the place, and was not yet old enough for the main stratum of Dycer's Bay society. Her means enabled her to live in a kind of retired gentility, and to keep and look after Newton, who had come to her at the age of twelve from the local orphanage, a thin, gawky child with chilblains and a sniff. Now, at sixteen, thanks to good food and gentle treatment, Newton had outgrown these disabilities, and, though still thin, promised to be pretty in a pale and quiet way. She had been named in accordance with the orphanage practice of calling children after the town or village they came from. Newton St. Bastable being

too long, the authorities had given her the first part only. Miss Balgannon in private called her Lily.

The work of looking after Miss Balgannon and 'The Beeches' was not heavy, and there was all day to do it in. Consequently Newton spent a good deal of her time looking out from behind the cream lace curtains into the street. To see through these called for skill, as the artist, a strong believer in filling the space allotted to him, had created a congested pattern of birds flying around obese cornucopias, which, once discerned, had a hypnotic effect on the beholder. Practice, however, had enabled Newton to ignore the pattern and select one of the few comparatively open-work patches for a peep-hole. She thus obtained an excellent view of Trevannion as he bore down upon the gate; and, seeing him stop outside and throw away the butt of his cigar, she at once realised his purpose, and ran up the stairs three at a time to warn her mistress.

Miss Balgannon was in her bedroom. She turned in surprise at Newton's breathless entry.

'Oh ma'am, ma'am! Mr. Trevannion!'

'Mr. Trevannion, Lily? What about him?'

'Coming to the door, ma'am. Are you in?'

Before Miss Balgannon could pull herself together and reply, Trevannion, having walked up the little garden path, addressed himself to the green enamelled hall door. Now, as they both listened, his knock reverberated through the house: firm, authoritative, grandiose, a knock no tradesman could compass.

Mistress and maid stared at each other, with a rising excitement: Newton, because she greatly admired Trevannion, who to her youthful mind resembled certain towering figures from the novelettes she read after supper in the kitchen: Miss Balgannon, because any man put her into a flutter, and Trevannion most of all.

Suddenly, in the midst of her confusion, she realised that he was being kept at the door. In a kind of panic, she made a little swimming motion with her hands.

'Run, Lily, run! Don't keep Mr. Trevannion waiting,' And then, as Lily ran downstairs, she remembered her

original question, and added, weakly and superfluously, 'Yes.'

She stood there, hearing the scrape of the opening door, the boom of Trevannion's voice, and Lily's shy answering tones. Further sounds told that Lily was showing him into the parlour.

'I'll tell Miss Balgannon, sir.'

The formula was correct, but the gulping eagerness would have brought a frown to the brows of Mrs. Beeton. Miss Balgannon, had she noticed it, would not have protested. Such feeling would have seemed to her wholly natural. Realising that she must go down, she began a series of little fluttering movements, dabbing her thin nostrils with a tiny handkerchief, smoothing her dress, patting her bodice, touching her hair with nervous uncertain fingers. She breathed quickly, and her lips uttered small, inarticulate sounds, as she looked in her mirror with no idea of what to correct and what to approve.

Newton reappeared in the doorway, making her jump.

'He's there, ma'am! I've shown him in.'

Miss Balgannon shut her eyes. Then with an access of dignity she said, 'I am coming,' and, Lily standing aside, she went downstairs.

2

The appearance and conduct of Miss Balgannon were so old-fashioned, even for Dycer's Bay, that a short account of her will not be out of place.

Ellen was the youngest and the prettiest of three daughters. Her sisters had each married, one at twenty-two, the other at twenty-five. As the beauty of the family, Ellen had been encouraged by her father and mother to be in no hurry, but to wait for Mr. Right, by whom they really meant Prince Charming. Affectionate, docile, and romantic, Ellen found no difficulty in accepting this view. She loved her home, she had no doubts about her parents' wisdom, and though not unpractical—she could sew, embroider, and do a certain amount of fancy cooking—she cultivated those accomplishments which were thought likely to attract a

distinguished husband. Her fingers moved nimbly over the yellowing keys of the Collard and Collard, to render 'The Swallows Return', 'The Fireman's Gallop', 'Echoes of Lucerne', and the less difficult passages of 'The Battle of Prague'. She sketched in water-colours; two specimens of her work, depicting a waterfall, and the belfry of St. Asaph's Church, Dycer's Bay, hung in the parlour.

Whether these accomplishments would have produced the desired effect neither Ellen nor her parents were able to discern. By the time she was thirty-one, no nobleman having appeared on the horizon, Mr. and Mrs. Balgannon decided to encourage the visits of an elderly solicitor by the name of Camber. Mr. Camber was expensively, if somewhat baggily dressed. He wore a gold Albert watch and chain and a gold signet ring, and it seemed safe to assume that he had plenty of money.

Mr. Camber was a long way from Prince Charming. Even the docile Ellen saw that. He drank a good deal of wine on these visits. It appeared that his medical adviser had recommended him to take port for his blood. To judge by the colour that suffused his nose and cheeks, the prescription was doing its work. Mr. Camber sat in the corner of a large sofa: Miss Balgannon came no nearer than a spindly antique chair facing him.

Thus inhibited, the courtship made little progress. It ended on the evening when Mr. Camber fell fast asleep during a performance of 'The Swallows Return' on the Collard and Collard, the top of which Miss Balgannon, for better tonal effect, had denuded of an album, two large china bowls containing ferns, and several photographs. After this, she could not be induced to receive him again.

This was perhaps as well, because not long afterwards Mr. Camber was involved in difficulties over some document he had signed which concerned a minor. It was characteristic of Miss Balgannon's innocence and the way she was brought up that, learning of this by hearsay only, she misinterpreted it, and was heard afterwards to say that he had been secretary to a colliery: and that no one took the trouble to undeceive her.

When she was⁴ close on thirty-five, what her parents termed a second prospect appeared. This gentleman, a retired auctioneer with an invalid daughter, was so business-like, and showed such interest in the Balgannon side of the marriage settlement, that his advances met with no response.

Soon after this her parents died, victims to one of the epidemics which still periodically scourged the neighbourhood. When she learned what was left to her, Miss Balgannon realised why the ex-auctioneer's material enquiries had been unwelcome to her parents. Helpless, ignorant, never having handled a penny that was not doled out to her, she was lost as any child, with more than childish apprehensions. Fortunately the Balgannons had once or twice employed a solicitor, and to him, counselled by the Rector, the Reverend Mr. Dilgall, she entrusted her case. With his assistance the house and most of the furniture were sold, and the proceeds, plus such small capital as was left after years of ineffective speculation by her father, promised a reduced but still decent livelihood. With her approval (she was hardly in a state to gainsay any arrangement) the solicitor procured her a twenty-eight year lease of 'The Beeches', and installed her there.

Maids were a problem. Miss Balgannon was of so mild and gentle a temper that, sooner or later, they began to domineer over her, to cheat her, to take liberties. She would suffer it, like a small ewe insulted by a dog, until at last, even more like the ewe, she would turn and stamp her foot and send the offender packing. In really difficult cases she fell back on her friend, Mrs. Bracegirdle. Mrs. Bracegirdle asked nothing better, and coped undismayed with the worst case of all, an Irish girl, who drank two bottles of cooking sherry and shut herself into the larder. After this episode her friend and counsellor, Mr. Dilgall, once more came to her rescue: Lily was fetched from the orphanage, and Miss Balgannon had no more trouble.

No more trouble from maids, that is. She had other troubles, chief of which was to make both ends meet. She was not accustomed to the sort of economy that was now necessary. It was Lily, of all people, who suggested a way out.

Miss Balgannon had grown fond of her, and spoke quite freely in her presence; though the ~~running~~ monologue she kept up was more like talking to herself than confiding in a child who was still inclined to use sleeve or apron in place of pocket handkerchief. But Lily was a good listener. She paid attention, and said little. Very often she said nothing. When she did speak, it was to the point. And so, one evening, when Miss Balgannon, faced by a bill from Murrough the grocer, whispered to herself for the sixth time, 'I don't know what to do, I'm sure,' Lily suddenly looked at her from clear, steady blue eyes.

'I know, Miss Balgannon, ma'am. We could take a lodger.'

The enormity of this suggestion was such that Miss Balgannon all but fainted. Getting back her breath, she uttered a series of little panting protests.

'Really, Newton . . . such an idea . . . improper, quite unsuitable, repugnant . . . what *would* my poor father—'

But for once Lily would not be silenced. She put her case with such logic and such good sense that Miss Balgannon, appalled, was obliged to consider the matter. She slept on it—or rather she spent an all but sleepless night on it—and in the morning went in agitation to consult Mr. Dilgall.

By now, such were the workings of her mind, horror had been succeeded by a sort of fascination. The thought was terrible; poor little Lily of course could not be expected to see how terrible; yet at the same time, to be rid of the wear and tear, the weekly anxiety. . . . The child had even told her how much she could charge. Thirty-five shillings a week! Preposterous! how could a chit like that know. . . . But Lily had been quite unshakeable, and, without realising it, Miss Balgannon had already accepted the figure.

She hardly dared broach the subject to Mr. Dilgall. To her inbred reluctance was added a new fear, that Mr. Dilgall might denounce it and make it impossible. But he did not denounce it. On the contrary, he approved. So did the old solicitor. Miss Balgannon scuttled back, almost breathless with excitement, to tell Lily. The thing now became

an adventure. They put their heads together, the solicitor drafted an advertisement—

‘Er—what figure were you thinking of asking, Miss Balgannon?’

And, looking him in the eye, she replied firmly, ‘I thought thirty-five shillings a week.’

—and it duly appeared in the sedate columns of the Dycer’s Bay *Morning Chronicle*.

During the days that followed Lily was not the only one to peer out from behind the lace curtains. But, for quite a while, nothing happened: and, despite the assurances of Lily, Miss Balgannon had made up her mind that no lodger would come, when suddenly one morning she was startled by a regular salvo upon the front door knocker.

Lily was out at the back, hanging up the washing. There was nothing for it but to go to the door herself. She wasn’t in a fit state, either: but really. . . . A second and louder salvo made her heart jump in her breast, and without more ado she ran to the door.

A rather stout red-faced gentleman in tweeds and a Tyrolean hat burst into the hall. Gesticulating with an ash-plant, he overwhelmed her with words.

‘You’re Miss Balgannon, aren’t you? I’ve called to take your rooms. Require bedroom, sitting-room, use of bath-room, and so on. All meals: leave selection to yourself. Don’t haggle, ma’am. Don’t argue. Far too much argument nowadays. No time, no time. Pay you three pounds a week. Here you are. Lemme have a receipt, I’ll stand the stamp, women never have stamps. Now, ma’am, if you please, show me my rooms. My things will follow later.’

Incapable of speech, Miss Balgannon showed him the sitting-room. He sat down in the arm-chair, took off his hat for the first time, and mopped his brow with a brown silk handkerchief.

‘That’s that, ma’am. Good. Now—what about dinner? Must have a bottle of claret with it, claret or dinner ale, you know.’

Miss Balgannon, prompted by her solicitor and the Reverend Mr. Dilgall, had written down and learned by

heart a set speech of Ciceronian eloquence about antecedents, references, and general qualifications, as an essential preliminary to the letting of her rooms. Not a word of it came to her mind. She did not even remember its existence till some hours afterwards, when she was making out her paying guest's first receipt. But she gave it only a moment's regret. A new thrill had obscured it. Her guest was no less a person than Mr. Joshua Murrough, elder brother to Mr. Ephraim Murrough, the eminent grocer of Numbers three to seven Dycer Street. This Mr. Joshua she knew to have been, until quite lately, a city magistrate. She had often read his judicial aphorisms and *bons mots* in her evening paper. It seemed that he had now retired on a pension declared by all the county press to be well-earned, and the editorials added a hope that he would live long to enjoy it.

Mr. Murrough settled down and made himself extremely snug and comfortable. He gave Miss Balgannon *carte blanche* in catering matters, with the sole proviso that all groceries, spirits, and other liquor must be bought from his brother. He lounged about the house for a great part of the day, reading and smoking exceedingly strong tobacco in a foul old briar pipe. His choice of reading was the greatest surprise to Miss Balgannon. He littered his sitting-room with penny dreadfuls, cheap detective stories, and a wide and varied collection of ladies' novelettes, from which last he derived unending boisterous amusement. This shocked Miss Balgannon, who imagined him in deep perusal of vast legal works, and was much disappointed to learn that magistrates did not wear wigs and scarlet robes. She had cherished a hope that one day he would put them on for the benefit of Lily and herself.

Mr. Murrough made a great change in life at 'The Beeches'. It would not be too much to say that he revolutionised it. Even when he was out, the evidence of his occupation was everywhere. He was something of a nuisance in the bathroom, where he behaved—to judge from sounds and results—like an overwrought porpoise. Such splashings, such grunts, such carelessness: water all over the floor, soap left in the bath, his razors and brushes lying anywhere, plus a

terrifying contrivance made of gutta percha, on the possible use of which Miss Balgannon was too modest to speculate, but which Lily guessed to be for reaching the more inaccessible parts of his back. Lily certainly earned her modest wage in these days; still, as Mr. Murrough not only chaffed and lectured her with blunt good nature, but was also generous with shillings in recognition of what he considered extra service, she gave him her youthful adoration and was only too glad to clean up after him. It made her feel motherly, a private sentiment so daring, but so warm and delightful, that she hugged herself over it in secret. Not for worlds would she have confessed it to Miss Balgannon.

Mr. Murrough moreover took them both to the circus at Christmas, and thought nothing of haling the flustered Miss Balgannon off to the brass band concerts at the Town Hall. These were the only form of music to which he was addicted, except the operas of Balfe, which did not come to Dycer's Bay, and indeed were hard to hear anywhere; a final proof, to Mr. Murrough, of the decadence of modern taste in the arts.

It was Mr. Murrough who planted the rose-trees in the front garden, it was he who had the hall door painted in an entirely novel manner, who cut the grass, and generally behaved in so arbitrary a fashion that Miss Balgannon lost what little will-power she had, and would often lie awake, trembling at the thought of him, with feelings more confused than she could ever remember. She felt that, if he went on at the present rate, one of these fine mornings she would be dragged off, dressed most unsuitably, to St. Asaph's and find herself Mrs. Murrough. Further than that her imagination dared not go.

At the same time she liked Mr. Murrough. He was masterful, explosive, hasty, tyrannical—a real live man, as she often explained in later years.

And he gave her much to remember. One evening, when he was paying the rent, Mr. Murrough suddenly asked if she owned the house. He asked it loudly and accusingly, so that the poor lady was glad to be able to reply that she did not.

On this Mr. Murrough emitted a loud, bull-like roar. Lily, coming in affright to see if he had a seizure, at first believed that he had; for he was stamping up and down the room, shaking both his fists in the air.

'Good God Almighty, woman!' he shouted at last. 'Why didn't you tell me before? No—not another word, ma'am. Not a word.'

And he stormed out of the room, leaving Miss Balgannon on the edge of tears.

'I don't know what I've done wrong, I'm sure,' she quavered, dabbing her eyes.

Lily put a protecting arm around her mistress's shoulders.

'It's nothing, ma'am,' she said. 'He don't mean anything by it. Never mind, ma'am, never mind. It's just his way.'

The next morning Mr. Murrough went down town. By what process of enquiry, after what negotiations, what browbeatings he attained his object, Miss Balgannon never knew: but he returned at ten minutes to one, charged into her room, and without preamble slapped the title deeds on the table, informing her that 'The Beeches' was now hers.

'But, by God, ma'am,' he roared, 'you'll have to pay me for it.'

He produced the brown silk handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

'Every person,' he continued, a little less loudly, 'should own their house. Can't be at the discretion of a damned landlord. Can't live on sufferance.'

Obviously he did not consider himself to be in that position. The idea of Joshua Murrough living at anyone's discretion would not have occurred to him for an instant.

'I got it at a sound figure,' he told the flabbergasted lady. 'Rascals were reasonable; quite reasonable. No trouble. Can't bear trouble, argument, nonsense of that kind. "How much d'you want?"' He turned and shot the question at the chiffonier. '"Come on, man, out with it. What's your figure? So. I'll give it, or I won't give it. Done with you. Or—Bang! Take it or leave it."' His gaze returned to Miss Balgannon. 'That's my way, ma'am. Yes. A reasonable figure, you'll allow. Eh?'

Miss Balgannon's lips moved feebly, without sound. The movement might perhaps have been interpreted as a query. 'Yes, ma'am.' His eyes opened wide, to a positive glare. 'Five hundred and twenty-five pounds, lock, stock, and barrel. Yes, ma'am. Why—Good God——!'

For Miss Balgannon had slid sideways off her chair in a dead faint.

Mr. Murrough reacted to this with a torrent of profanity, at the end of which he bawled for Lily. That young woman, running upstairs from the kitchen, wasted no time in questions. She lifted her mistress up, sat her in the arm-chair, and proceeded briskly to pat her cheek and the backs of her hands. Mr. Murrough lent no assistance, but stamped up and down the room in a transport of impatience. He wished to conclude the matter and begin his dinner, and looked on Miss Balgannon's swoon as an inconsiderate interruption.

Under Lily's ministrations she soon recovered, opening and shutting her eyes and uttering tiny exclamations. Mr. Murrough stopped his pacing, groped for his hip pocket, and produced a flask. He charged across, pushing Lily aside.

'Here, dammit!' he exploded: and administered to her, none too gently, a dram of such potency that she fell into a paroxysm of coughing and spluttering, and Lily had to pat her back.

The scene might have continued indefinitely, had not Mr. Murrough put an end to it by clapping his hands together very loudly an inch from the end of Miss Balgannon's nose. The shock caused her to sit up straight, and regard him with terrified dark eyes, like a lemur.

'Now, ma'am. If I may have your attention for a moment?'

He had it. She stared at him transfixed.

'You'll have to save up, and repay me at the rate of thirty pounds a year.' She nodded. 'But'—he wagged a threatening finger at her—'no damned interest, d'you hear me, ma'am! Not a stiver.' She shook her head. He looked fiercely at her, then stepped back, satisfied. 'I'm no usurer, thank God,' he growled. 'That clear?'

This time his glare included Lily, who nodded, after her mistress. Mr. Murrough stood in the middle of the room, like a bull undecided whom to charge.

'Right,' he said. 'Now—you, Newton—dinner!'

It took Miss Balgannon a long time to realise what had happened. For quite a while she imagined herself wholly in Mr. Murrough's power. Under this impression she would sit by herself, holding on to the arms of her chair, a prey to long trembling fits which shook her from head to toe. But the persuasions of Lily, and even more the sensible and prosaic explanations of her friend Mrs. Bracegirdle, at last eased her mind: and though she never lapsed, after that, from a sort of anxious watchfulness where Mr. Murrough was concerned, and the idea was never far from the surface of her mind that her lodger might one day make upon her some unspecified demand which she would be compelled to fulfil, she ceased to be actively scared of him.

She had paid off three instalments only when all cause for fear departed. Lily, going in one morning as usual to call Mr. Murrough, was horrified to find him stiff and cold. He must have died, the doctor said, within an hour or so of going to bed.

Lily mourned him with unaffected grief, going about the house with eyes swollen and red from weeping: and Miss Balgannon, whose distress was at first general, discovered with emotion that she had been very fond of Mr. Murrough. Whether this feeling was authentic, or an unconscious attempt to emulate Lily, would be hard to say, for at no time in Mr. Murrough's life was there even the feeblest sign of affection between them. Certainly she missed him. It was hard to believe that he was gone. Even during the three days when he lay, majestic and waxen, in the room upstairs, his restless spirit seemed to blow about the house, and the two women, sitting with drawn blinds below, waited to hear the accustomed plunging in the bathroom or the thud of boots flung on the bedroom floor. Once, as they came out into the hall, Lily gave a little cry and seized her mistress's arm. She had caught sight of Mr. Murrough's big overcoat on its hanger, with his hat on top of it.

For some weeks after the departure of the hearse—Mr. Ephraim Murrough^h took care on a lavish scale of all the arrangements, down to gifts of madeira, cherry brandy, and a large ham, to console the small household—Miss Balgannon from a sense of delicacy forbore to repeat her advertisement for a lodger. She and Lily were just deciding that the time had come to renew it, when she received a call from Mr. Atwood, the senior partner of Messrs. Jones, Atwood, and Atwood, Mr. Murrough's solicitors. Mr. Atwood, in the driest of voices, read to her a document which, for all she could at first make of it, might have been a private letter from Pliny the Younger to his Emperor. At its conclusion he coughed, eyed her severely, and informed her in plain terms that her late paying guest had left her sole owner of 'The Beeches' for her lifetime and that of her legatees, together with the sum of two hundred pounds in cash, free of all encumbrance, adding the ferocious hope that she would now at all events have that accursed linoleum removed and put a carpet on the stairs. To Lily he left one hundred pounds, together with all his twopenny novels, penny dreadfuls, and other literature, the paper covers to be bound in large volumes with leather backs out of an additional sum specially set aside for this purpose. The entire bequest was intended, the will remarked, as a small token of regret for all the trouble he had given her.

Poor Lily wept afresh at this. Clearing up after Mr. Murrough had been no grief to her, but a pleasure. She wanted to tell him so, and she could not. So wrought upon was she that at last she got leave of her mistress, and spent three shillings on flowers, which she placed upon his grave. The hundred pounds, on Mr. Dilgall's advice, she lodged in the Post Office Savings Bank.

This change in her circumstances made Miss Balgannon defer advertising for a lodger. Indeed, she wondered whether it would even be necessary to have one again. Someone very special it would have to be, to follow Mr. Murrough: and, musing sentimentally on the past, she grew further and further to exalt his qualities, until it

seemed that nobody at all comparable to him was left in the world.

So her two rooms remained empty, and she and Lily adjusted themselves once more to a quiet house without a man in it. Indeed, after Mr. Murrough's death the first man to cross its threshold—apart from a visitor to the kitchen, of whom more presently, and an old seafaring friend of her father's—was Trevannion. He had paid three or four visits before the call, on a fine morning in April 1924, which is the start of this history.

3

Trevannion's call being a prime event in the lives of the persons concerned, we are not fully equipped for going ahead without one more glance backward, this time into the history of Lily, *alias* Newton.

As has been explained, she was born and abandoned in the township of Newton St. Bastable. This small town lay in a deep valley, and was distinguished for its high rainfall, its high mortality rate, and a single prosperous industry, the Newton St. Bastable Cloth Milling Company, Limited.

These three distinctions were not unrelated. The Mills came first. Their owners, members of a religious community, purchased the surrounding land somewhere about the middle of the last century, and the cottages they built for the first operatives were the beginnings of the town. It grew with the growth of the business; and a damp climate, plus a primitive water supply, inadequate sanitation, and the unhealthy nature of a great deal of the work at the Mills, accounted for the high death rate. The owners and descendants, having control of the town and all municipal enterprise, did little to increase their expenses in the way of modernising and improving conditions. A series of outraged concessions to sanitary inspectors increased perforce in effect after the turn of the century, so that by the time of Lily's arrival the death rate was no longer notorious, except during the epidemics which still broke out, every now and then, spreading sometimes farther afield, even to Dycer's Bay. But there was still much to be desired; and the owners,

by charging low rents and providing surface concessions, managed to keep the workers apathetic about the risks they still ran.

The town possessed one undertaker, by name Matthew Pipes. Mr. Pipes, had he been one to connect cause with effect, would have viewed sanitary inspectors and Health Acts with a disfavour rivalling that of the Mill owners. For years now, his business had been shrinking, and, being of an unadaptable frame of mind, he saw no prospect of improving it. Unable to lament openly a change in the public health which gave satisfaction to everyone else, he brooded over it in private, his other subject of meditation being the current price of elm.

Mrs. Pipes seldom appeared in public. She was popularly understood to have seen the Light, and was a martyr to neuritis. The couple had one son, who shared the gloom of their grey stone cottage. Aged about twenty-two, he worked in the Mills, on the operative side. The Company insisted that all who entered their employ should begin at the bottom. In the case of Matthew junior, this meant the dyeing vats. Here he and a number of other pale and sickly-looking youths, under the guidance of a bitter foreman who played the cornet in chapel on Sundays, threw rolls of raw flannel into the vats and poked them about with long wooden poles resembling oars. The young men stood on wooden platforms above the vats, inhaling all day the steam from the bubbling dyes. The smell of this steam made visitors feel sick, but Matthew junior and his fellow workers had long ceased to notice it.

When the rolls had had enough, they were fished out, looking like drowned women, and hung in long tunnel-like tubes as big as the boiler of a locomotive, where they were dried by engine-driven fans at either end. It was a wretched occupation for a young man, but Matt, as he was called to differentiate him from his father, could console himself with the thought that he had less than a year to go before being promoted to a less noisome branch of the business.

Matt Pipes was in the habit of going for rest and refreshment to one of the public houses which did a good business

in the benighted airs of Newton St. Bastable. So good a business, in fact, that the harassed wife of the publican announced her inability to carry on without help, and a barmaid was installed, by name Miss Jones. Miss Jones was a beauty, dark, shapely, well-coloured, with a straight nose, and a spiritual expression which masked a common and calculating mind. She was so decorative that for a week or so the local males held off, intimidated. They were not used to anything in this line; and such of them as responded to her beauty were struck idealistic, and refrained altogether from the jocularly and ease habitual in their dealings with barmaids and other accessible females.

Among those impressed was Matt Pipes. He was usually of a taciturn cast, and had no truck with girls, displaying in their presence a kind of sulky embarrassment. In what frame of mind he contemplated Miss Jones nobody could decide: but his interest was visible from the first night, and caused much comment.

At the end of a week, he was observed to approach and speak to her in an undertone, at the same time presenting her with a rose. It was a red rose, and that, on the authority of a commercial traveller from Birmingham present on the occasion, unmistakably denoted passion.

However this may have been, it was evident that Matt meant business. He persisted in his attentions, and paid no heed to remarks. He did not even seem to care if news of his addiction reached his parents.

Miss Jones was not unduly flattered by these attentions. A city-bred girl, she had made careful plans for her future. The plans were simple. She would get married as soon as possible to a person of substance, after which she would lie on a sofa, eat chocolates, and read novels, with occasional jaunts to theatres and pictures, but no work or worry whatsoever. If her husband were young and handsome, so much the better: but the essentials were that he should have money and be in awe of her, and therefore easy to manage.

Miss Jones had some idea of her market value, and, by the time she had served a month behind the bar, she had gained a surprising knowledge of Newton St. Bastable and

its male inhabitants. Matt Pipes was not a first-class prospect, but she had formed a good opinion of his ability, and she was not to be blamed for falling into the popular error of estimating his parents' business on past rather than on present form. Moreover, Matt was good-looking, in a sulky sort of way, and seemed amenable to all her suggestions.

Everyone agreed that Matt was very fortunate, but his gloomy expression did not notably brighten. There was a serious impediment to his wooing—lack of money. His parents held the purse strings. Matt had not even command of what he earned: he had to give most of it to his mother. Although the subject had never been raised, he knew well enough that the match was not one of which Mr. and Mrs. Pipes would approve. At any moment they might hear what was going on. It was a wonder they had not done so already. Nothing but their retired way of living could account for it.

Matt was therefore in a dilemma. His natural inclinations apart, he knew that he must show sufficient ardour to keep the prize he had won. At the same time, the home situation demanded prudence and wary going.

Then Miss Jones complicated matters for him, and for herself, by an unforeseen development. Going to bed one night, she realised not only that she liked Matt, but that she loved him. So in their next few meetings she was less coy, less careful, with the result that, before he realised, Matt was secretly engaged to her, and twelve guineas in debt to the town jeweller, a gentleman of Eastern origin who lent money as a sideline (or rather as a main line), for an engagement ring. The jeweller was sworn to secrecy, his price being an additional rate of interest on the loan.

The secret was kept, improbable though this may sound, until one day Miss Jones gave him news which meant that it could not be kept much longer. This placed Matt in a quandary. He had not yet dared say a word to his dour parents, now obsessed with their speculations, religious, statistical, and commercial. For the first time in his life, he began to give his parents deep attention. He had no illusions as to how they would receive his news. What interested him was how long they were likely to remain alive.

His mind, cold and egotistical, was used to death. The family business had given him an intimate knowledge of everything to do with it.

Matt contemplated his misanthropic father and his pious mother, and decided there was far too much life in them for his liking. One of the periodical epidemics was sweeping the valley, but, he reflected sourly, it never seemed to fall where it was wanted. Action was needed. He set to work each day to secure microscopic quantities of crude arsenic. It was the easiest thing in the world. There were quantities of it, used for the dyeing, in a little wooden storehouse adjoining the vats. So carelessly was it kept that very often it was lying about on the floor. Nobody would have noticed if Matt had abstracted a pound of the stuff, but, true to his cautious nature, he took only a pinch at a time.

As soon as he judged he had enough, he composed himself to wait for a suitable opportunity. The epidemic played into his hands. Such was its severity that some of the victims died within a few hours of being attacked. The symptoms were violent abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, vomiting, and collapse. Accordingly one morning Matt put enough arsenic into his parents' breakfast porringers to satisfy a Borgia. He ate with them, and left rather quickly for the Mill, with no sign of excitement but a slightly heightened colour.

Just before the midday break he was summoned to the Manager's office, where the news was conveyed to him, with surprising delicacy, that his parents had suddenly died.

The news seemed to stun Matt.

'Died, sir? They can't—it can't be! Why, they were as well as ever I saw them when we had breakfast together this morning. There must be some mistake.'

'No mistake, Pipes, my lad, I'm afraid. It's true enough. Bear up.' The Manager patted his arm. 'My own poor father went the same sudden way, sixteen years ago. Struck down and gone in a matter of hours. If you ask me, it's the mountains.'

'The mountains, sir?'

'Aye. Full to the top with copper ore. That's where our

water comes from. You can't call that healthy. Well—you'd better cut off home, Pipes. Don't come back for a day or so, till all's fixed up.'

Matt thanked him, and went home. The cottage was full of sympathetic, eager, and useless neighbours. His natural apprehensions were eased to find that all took it for granted the epidemic was to blame. Matt allowed himself to be led upstairs to look on the dead, in the stark room where he had hardly ever been while they lived. A faint reluctance gave way to curiosity as he entered the room. They did not look much changed, but each wore a peaceful expression. This took away any slight feeling of guilt in Matt's breast: it covered all thought of the agonies and convulsions that must have preceded that waxen calm.

The doctor, an elderly man whose whole practice had been in the valley, had no hesitation in ascribing death to the epidemic. Matt had an unpleasant shock when he heard that, not having attended either of his parents for many months, the doctor could not certify the cause of death, but was obliged to make a report to the Coroner. The chill of this news contracted to an icy fear when he learned, by apparently casual enquiry, that if the Coroner did not accept the report he would order a post-mortem and hold an inquest.

The hours that followed were the worst in Matt's life. His instinct was to run, a course which he knew would be fatal. He remembered stories of murderers who were easily caught. He wondered, in a sweating agony of fear, how he had dared to do such a thing. In his longing to disavow it, he came almost to believe that he had not. How he could have borne the strain would be hard to guess: but fate was kinder to him than he deserved. He was not kept long in suspense. The Coroner was quite satisfied, and Mr. and Mrs. Pipes were soon safely underground.

Matt's conduct on the days after the funeral was a model of filial piety. Not until three weeks had gone by did he consult a solicitor and find out how he was situated. There was a reasonable balance in the bank, but the business on the books had dwindled to a number of bad debts and a

bare dozen orders. An insurance policy for two hundred pounds on his mother's life the Insurance Company paid without question.

If Matt was disappointed by the state of the parental business, he did not confide in Miss Jones. He engaged a carpenter to carry on with what business there was: he set his solicitor to harry the debtors: and after as short an interval as was consonant with decency—a longer one would have outraged it in a different way—he married Miss Jones.

Any dreams the bride had of lying on a sofa and eating chocolates were soon dispelled. Despite his passion for her, Matt did not turn out to be that sort of husband at all. Realising what she had let herself in for, and made peevish by her condition, she retaliated by shattering any illusions that might have accompanied Matt's desire for her. What was more, he observed one morning that she was looking at him queerly, and elicited from her that he had been talking in his sleep.

She did not tell him what he had said, but Matt decided to take no chances. Acting quickly and secretly, he realised what assets he could lay hands on. One morning he told his wife that he was off to Poole, where he had heard that a quantity of elm was to be had at an advantageous price, and set off with every expression of reluctance at leaving her.

She did not see him again. For reasons which her neighbours could not understand, she seemed disinclined to call in the help of the police. It was possible she had a suspicion about the deaths of Matt's parents, and perhaps feared that she might in some way be implicated. Or, perhaps, she thought it would be more to her advantage to trace and deal with him herself.

In any case, it was a difficult situation for her. Matt had left a small sum of money in an envelope, barely enough to tide her over the confinement. In her need she consulted a solicitor who used to frequent the public house where she served before her marriage. He was not a prosperous solicitor: he did odd jobs for customers: but he was astute, and his skill in getting the perpetrators of minor misdemeanours off free, or with the lightest of fines, had given

him a local reputation. With her professional instinct for character, Miss Jones felt sure there had been some irregularity somewhere in his career. To what extent she confided in him can only be guessed. At all events, the solicitor, Mr. Antrim, supported her decision not to consult the police. Under his direction she inserted one or two advertisements in the local papers: but she made no official complaint.

As soon as the child, a girl, was born, she consigned it to the care of the local institution, and put all possible distance between herself and Newton St. Bastable, taking a post as barmaid at Holyhead. The child was after some years transferred to the Orphanage at Dycer's Bay, where she remained until she entered the service of Miss Balgannon.

4

Lily's history at 'The Beeches' had been uneventful; Mr. Murrough was its highlight. But the years had been all-important to the child. For the first time in her life, she was a person with a recognised position, treated with a kindness that was personal, focused on her, Lily, not just bestowed with rough and ready impartiality on a multitude of whom she happened to be one. Miss Balgannon was not only apt to give affection but, what was more valuable, needed to receive it. She could be taken charge of, looked after, mothered. Again, the very quietness of life at 'The Beeches' gave Lily a chance to grow and develop her individuality in a way that might not have been possible in a large household. She had to grow. Miss Balgannon did not possess enough vitality, was not positive enough. For strength, for continuity of purpose, she drew on Lily.

Lily was only dimly aware of this, if at all. She told her mistress everything that happened to her, and felt no discontent at a life that would have been irksome and dull to so many girls of her age. After the din of the orphanage Miss Balgannon's home was Eden. Lily was happy. She sang about her work in a small, pure voice: she grew taller, tidier: her movements passed from gawky and eager jerks to a coltish charm, with the promise of real grace: the lines

of her face changed to a likelihood of that fine essential structure which is a woman's best guarantee of good looks that will last.

These developments were not unobserved, especially as Miss Balgannon, who had quite good taste in a negative sort of way, kept Lily pleasantly attired. Both the milkman's and butcher's boys began to prolong their calls beyond the strict needs of business. This gave Lily a good deal of innocent pleasure, until she saw that the two youths were developing a tendency to arrive about the same time. This in itself would not have worried Lily, but the two did not seem to share in her pleasure. They looked askance at each other, and the milkman's boy, who was lively and quick-witted, made a number of sardonic remarks about his dogged, red-faced, and unhappy rival. The situation reached its climax with the almost simultaneous dropping in of a couple of love letters at the open kitchen window.

Neither letter bore a signature, but to Lily the authorship of each lay plain upon the page. The letter of the young milkman was cheerful, ardent, and assured. That of the butcher's boy breathed no less ardour, but was humble and adoring. Lily read each several times, then took them both to show to her mistress.

Miss Balgannon stared at the letters, then at Lily, who stood before her, innocent and demure, but conscious—to her own surprise—of a novel desire to smirk.

'Good gracious me, Lily. Well. Bless my soul.' Miss Balgannon looked at the letters again. 'Who *can* they be from?'

Another obscure impulse woke in Lily. Things were happening to her. She looked at the carpet.

'It doesn't say,' she replied.

'But—but—have you no idea?' Before Lily could answer, Miss Balgannon recollected that her maid was still only a child, and added quickly, 'But no, you wouldn't, of course, my dear. Well, well. I don't know *what* to say, I'm sure.'

She knew very well what to do, however, which was to consult Mrs. Bracegirdle, that infallible guide in all affairs

of the heart and every form of commerce between the sexes. Mrs. Bracegirdle was delighted to oblige. She read the letters with a practised eye, noting the glib and vigorous assurance of the one, the uncouth but glowing devotion of the other. She then requested Miss Balgannon to pull the bell and summon Lily.

Lily came in. Innocent and candid, with clear blue eyes, she faced the dark-eyed widow, who perceived no trace of the small concealments and self-satisfactions alive in her young bosom.

A tender cross-examination, much enjoyed by Lily, convinced Mrs. Bracegirdle that she was heart-free, and narrowed down the problems of authorship to her two known admirers.

'Though, mind you, Ellen,' Mrs. Bracegirdle remarked, 'we can never rule out the possibility that one of them at least is from some dark horse, who hasn't dared to say anything openly.'

'Neither George nor Stan *said* anything,' Lily put in modestly.

Mrs. Bracegirdle looked sharply at her for a moment; then relaxed again. 'Still,' she amended, 'I don't think it's likely. No. If you ask me—' she placed a plump hand on the letters, which were lying open upon the table—'these two young men have come to some sort of an agreement.'

'An *agreement*, dear?'

'Yes. They have agreed to put their claims to the test by each writing a letter. How else do you account for the letters not being signed, and arriving together in the same fashion?' She looked triumphantly at them both. 'Depend upon it, that's the case. Well. The next step is plain.'

'What is it, dear? The—the police?'

'*Police?* My dear Ellen! what on earth for? This isn't an affair for the police. There's no crime in what these boys have done. Not that you can countenance it, of course. You have to keep entire control. Lily is in your charge, and you are responsible for her. She has to be looked after, protected, until she is old enough to take care of herself.'

She gave Lily a loving and encouraging smile. 'No. The next step, Ellen dear, is with you.'

'With me?' Miss Balgannon began to pant. 'What must I do?'

'Summon both these young men, ask them what they mean by their behaviour, and send them packing.'

'Oh, my dear . . . I couldn't. I couldn't possibly. I shouldn't know what to say to them.'

'Very well. In that case, I will do it for you.'

Miss Balgannon clasped her hands, and looked at her friend in a transport of gratitude and relief. Lily, her eyes still modestly lowered, found herself once more a playground for novel emotions: disappointment, compassion, and a wholly unaccountable feeling of excitement.

Next morning, therefore, when the young milkman came, he was bidden by Lily to step inside. Immensely gratified by what he took to be a favourable reception of his letter, he attempted at once to put an arm about her waist: but Lily, primly keeping her distance, said, 'This way, please,' and ushered him into the parlour, where he was confronted by Mrs. Bracegirdle and Miss Balgannon.

His eyes went from one to the other. Squeezed-up grey eyes, with a spark of devilment in them, they went blank for a couple of seconds, then lit again with something like amusement. He was dressed as usual in light brown corduroy trousers, a dirty tweed coat cut into the waist, with a red and white spotted handkerchief about his neck. No razor had yet touched his face. He had curly hair, there was a cleft in his chin, and Mrs. Bracegirdle, viewing him with a professional eye, marvelled that Lily had not fallen victim to so much impudent charm, so much sheer maleness.

'Good morning, young man,' she said, eyeing him sternly.

He raised his eyebrows, looked at her, and then at Miss Balgannon. The implied question was as obvious as it was insolent.

'Good morning, ma'am,' he replied, giving Mrs. Bracegirdle an ironic bob, and then allowing his eyes to travel appreciatively over her physical attractions. Mrs. Bracegirdle drew in her breath. Something inside her gave a

grim little chuckle. Outwardly, she prepared to annihilate him.

Before she could start, he lifted his can. 'The milk?' he enquired easily.

Miss Balgannon fluttered into action.

'Yes, yes, Lily. The jug.'

Lily withdrew at once to fetch it. The boy filled a silence which otherwise might have been awkward by whistling very softly and meditatively between his teeth, and once more covertly eyeing Mrs. Bracegirdle.

Then, to the relief of both ladies, Lily came back with the jug. Large and pot-bellied, it was encrusted with sparsely-clad Bacchantes chasing each other in white relief on a blue background. Lily, fresh from the orphanage, had asked her mistress what they were, and Miss Balgannon had replied doubtfully that she thought they were angels.

'Thanks,' said the boy, giving Lily a brilliant smile: and he poured the frothing milk with great skill, spilling not a drop, and checking the flow at the last instant so that the jug was filled to the brim: so full, indeed, that Lily put both hands to steady it before putting it down.

'There!' he exclaimed. 'You can't say as Harvey's gives you short measure.'

Even Lily felt that the interview was getting a little out of hand. Mrs. Bracegirdle put the two letters open on the table.

'Young man. Have you seen either of these before?'

He looked at them, his head on one side. He cocked an eyebrow.

'That 'ud be tellin'.'

'Did you write either of them? *Can* you write?' She added, as he did not reply.

He raised his eyes to a spot on the wall above her head.

'Can I write. That's a good 'un. How does she reckon I enters up the amounts? *Drors 'em?*'

'In that case, did you write either of these letters?'

He brought his eyes down, and looked at her with an air of tolerant amusement.

'All right, lady. Have it yer own way.' To their

astonishment, he whistled a few bars of a popular tune, turned, and made for the doorway. Then he turned, and grinned openly.

'All right. I know where I get of.'

The three women, looking at each other, heard him stump off and clatter up the steps, not in the least abashed, jangling his cans and whistling shrilly.

'Well!' Miss Balgannon exclaimed, scandalised. 'Well!'

Mrs. Bracegirdle pursed her lips and shook her head.

'A very impudent young fellow,' she pronounced. 'He'll come to no good, mark my words.' She looked at Lily. 'I pity any poor girl who gets into his clutches.'

She took the letter, looked through it with affected disgust, and tore it up. Lily made a faint, involuntary movement, at once checked.

But if Mrs. Bracegirdle did not score all the points in this encounter, the next was a gift to her. The butcher's boy came in like a calf to the slaughter. So downcast, so guilty he looked on receipt of the summons, it was all Lily could do not to take his hand consolingly and pull him into the room after her.

Mrs. Bracegirdle saw at once that he was easy game. She noted also his fine physique, and the set of his broad shoulders.

'Good morning, young man.'

His round face the picture of woe, he mumbled a reply.

'What is your name?'

'Gummick, ma'am.'

'What?'

'Gummick, ma'am. Stan Gummick.'

'Well—Gummick—did you write this?'

He gulped, and nodded miserably.

'Yes'm.'

Mrs. Bracegirdle drew a deep breath. The homily she had prepared seemed to hesitate on her tongue. Suddenly Stan looked up.

'I didn't mean no harm, ma'am.' His eyes stared into hers, humble, supplicating. 'I didn't mean no disrespect.'

Mrs. Bracegirdle half saw, half heard the little fluttery

movement of Miss Balgannon, the tiny forward droop of Lily, as they both instinctively drew towards the butcher's boy in compassion. She turned to her friend.

'I think, Ellen, if you will leave me to manage this. . . . It will be better for me to have a few words with the young man alone.'

Miss Balgannon rose.

'Come, Lily.'

And, as she went out, she hesitated for a moment, the gesture saying as plain as any words, 'Don't be too hard on him.' And Lily, following, gave Stan a compassionate glance which would have added him had he seen it.

Mrs. Bracegirdle had no intention of being hard on him. She asked him a number of questions, and was so struck with the simplicity and honesty of his replies that, subject to confirmation from Miss Balgannon, she gave him leave to pay his respects to Lily, and even to come to tea in the kitchen once a fortnight.

She was almost ashamed to report such a concession to romance, and upheld it with the sagacious reflection that to encourage the attentions of so estimable and at the same time penniless a young man would keep Lily from the chance of more dangerous attachments. Miss Balgannon affected to be impressed by this stroke of worldly wisdom. The two beamed at each other in perfect understanding. Then they sent for Lily and announced their decision. Lily looked demure, and expressed her gratitude. If she had any secret thoughts, they did not appear.

She was not in the least in love with Stan. Child though she was, she knew that much. But she was fond of him, she felt motherly towards him, and she did not really want the disturbances threatened afar off by the likes of George the milkman. She enjoyed having Stan to tea, fussing over him, and listening to his talk. He was quiet, and sweet, and peaceful. She could talk to him, too, while she sat and sewed. He would listen. She could think aloud when he was there. Sometimes she heard her voice saying thoughts she didn't know she had, till she told them to Stan.

It was a shock to her when he took up boxing, and she

exclaimed in real distress over the first injuries to his face. She dared not at first confide this development to Miss Balgannon, who she was sure would be horrified, let alone Mrs. Bracegirdle. When the truth came out, she fell back on the fact that Stan had graduated to the prize ring from the 'unimpeachable respectability of the St. Asaph's Church Lads' Brigade, then in charge of a beefy and sporting young schoolmaster. This shook Miss Balgannon, but her original horror remained.

Mrs. Bracegirdle, however, came out robustly on the side of sport. Boxing she declared to be a manly pastime, and waited to see what present Stan would buy for Lily out of his earnings.

She had to wait some time for this, since Stan, a model of duty, gave the greater part of the small sums he collected to his mother. At Christmas, however, he presented Lily with a large bland brooch, so like his own visage in shape that the widow all but burst out laughing when she saw it. She recovered herself, praised it warmly, patted Lily's arm, smiled her out of the room: and sighed.

Such was life at 'The Beeches' when Trevannion came to the front door, with a scheme in his breast which, if successful, would change its course for ever.

III

MRS. WISHART, Trevannion's landlady, having withdrawn to her own regions in order to proclaim to him her complete indifference to his concerns, came out again as soon as she heard him close the front door.

She stood listening suspiciously for him to go down the steps. After a couple of seconds she realised that he had not done so, and imagined that, of like mind with herself, he was standing in order to spy through one of the imitation stained-glass panels beside the door. She therefore drew back into her doorway, and waited until she heard him go down. Then, advancing to the door and peering through a place in the glass panel where one of her children had torn the paper off, she was able to see him stop and look ostentatiously at the small separate bunker where he kept his own coal. The sight made her snort with indignation. Her lips went to an even thinner line, and she glared malevolently at him as he looked up at the windows, and then, with a flourish of his malacca cane, tiptoed round the garbage can and disappeared through the back door into the lane.

With rage in her heart, Mrs. Wishart came back from the door, and went up to Trevannion's room. Her curiosity about her lodger was the more violent for having hardly a thing to satisfy it. Eighteen months now he had been in her house, and, essentially, she knew no more about him than on the day he came.

In the eyes of Mrs. Wishart, Trevannion had two cardinal sins. He was mean, by which she meant that he left nothing about for her to pilfer. He bought his own food and his own coal. The coal he locked away, as he did any liquor, and on the food he kept so sharp an eye that, try as she might, Mrs. Wishart could appropriate no pickings for herself or the little Wisharts.

His second sin, almost as grievous, was that he never left any of his letters or personal papers lying about, thereby depriving her of all chance to find out about his private

affairs. His waste paper basket never contained so much as a torn envelope. None of her keys would open the secretary. The lid resisted even that dexterous insertion of a knife blade, which had proved so successful upon the somewhat similar piece of furniture in which her late husband used to lock up anything he wished to keep to himself. To the day of his death Henry Wishart suffered repeated bewilderment at the disappearance, first of half-sovereigns, and later of ten-shilling notes, from this apparently inviolable fastness. Being addicted to drink, and so unable always to rely upon his memory, he could never be sure what had happened, and accepted these recurring losses as inscrutable and unpleasant Acts of God.

A commercial traveller of amiable temper, he had died before his two little daughters were old enough to appreciate him. In the mind of the elder he remained a memory, which gained in radiance as the years made her realise, more and more, the unpleasantness of life without him. Whether it was cause or effect would be hard to say, but, when she was six, her Sunday School teacher was startled to hear her pray, with an articulation which allowed of no mistake, to 'Our Father Wishart in heaven.' The resultant scoldings and explanations gave little Edna a religious setback from which she never recovered. By dehumanising her prayer, and robbing it of remembered warmth, the teacher not only deprived the child of a real comfort, but injured her faith irreparably.

This was doubly unfortunate, as those who lived with Mrs. Wishart needed any comfort they could get. Tall, muscular, and flat-chested, she slopped about the house in old shapeless slippers. Her skirts were always higher in front than at the back. Though thin and gaunt, she never seemed to feel the cold, her only concession to frosty weather being an openwork black woollen shawl like part of a fishing net. Her complexion was sallow. With a little more life and a touch more colour, she could have passed for one of the more lugubrious types of pantomime dame.

This aspect of her had struck Trevannion the first time he appeared on her doorstep. He found himself distracted,

in the subsequent interview, by the expectation that at any moment she might break into a melancholy song and dance. But the nearest approach to a song in the house was the pinched and whining voices of the little Wisharts, and the only dancing came when their mother slapped them. Mrs. Wishart was the landlady of the comic postcard, but with a horrid actuality. Any colour and character she had appeared in her talk, which rose from a nagging note of complaint to an embittered terseness lit by flashes of venom. The universe seemed to have no use for Mrs. Wishart, and treated her accordingly; and she passed the treatment on.

Trevannion took delight in aggravating her, delight tempered by the fact that he did not relish her resulting dislike of him. Malevolence frightened him. He could never feel that he had deserved it, and took it always as a wanton attack, calling for retaliation. He would greatly have preferred to be on friendly terms with his landlady. Since she would not have it so, he took pleasure in tormenting her. The fact that she could be relied on to torment herself was an added satisfaction.

Entering his room, Mrs. Wishart had no real hope of finding anything. All these months of search had yielded her a single trophy—half a burnt envelope, addressed care of the Post Office to a box number. This discovery had made her ill with spleen. The idea that he would not even have his letters sent to her house was a bitter insult, and she had also to destroy a series of ingenious theories built upon the belief that he received no letters at all. Outwitted and outraged at once! it was more than any self-respecting landlady could stand; and her dislike of him contracted to hatred.

On another occasion he had left on top of the secretary a brass balance similar in size to those used for weighing letters, but having little circular scales with rims to them. In one of these rested a little whitish powder. Mrs. Wishart wet her forefinger, dipped it in the powder, and after some hesitation tasted it with her tongue. It had a slightly bitter taste; if there had been more of it, it would probably have fizzed. Looking at the medical books, she decided that her

lodger was making pills for the use of females in trouble; a dramatic theory which, imparted darkly to her neighbours, went some way to make up for the loss of those which she had been obliged to discard. She had discarded them publicly, for some curious kink in her nature, some occulted streak of puritanism, would not allow her to conceal her error from the women to whom she gossiped. She was obliged to admit that double shame, the shame of mistaken theories, and the scalding shame of a lodger who so disdained the house where he lived that he would not have his letters addressed to it. In revenge she whispered even more venomous, more lurid conjectures; and her confidantes, with compressed lips, nodded enthusiastically over the substitutes.

Mrs. Wishart stood in her lodger's room, looking about her with sour and practised eye. The completeness with which she was baffled made her ill with rage. It was as if Trevannion read her mind. Every natural inclination was frustrated. The legitimate wish to go through the pockets of his clothes could not be gratified, because he kept them locked in his wardrobe. Not a scrap of paper, no evidence, not a shred: nothing but the intense conviction that a man who hid so much had much to hide. And this conviction raised in her such a hunger to know, such an anguish of power just out of reach, that her days were being poisoned. She would not have minded sheltering a crook. Indeed, had Trevannion confided in her, and made her partner in some scheme against society, the chances were that she would have aided him loyally and kept his secret. But to be shut out, held off, disdained, every question parried, to be met with a glassy courtesy that slipped quickly into veiled contempt: to hate, and to be foiled in all effort to vent her hatred: these things so worked upon her that when, as now, they rose up in her mind, she seethed with fury, and she had to hold on by the back of a chair, her other hand upon her heart, scarcely able to breathe until the spasm passed.

While she stood, her sight slowly clearing, the skidding shapes of the room by degrees steadying themselves, there came a knock at the front door. The front door! here was an outlet for her anger. Grimly she strode across the hall,

with a vicious emphasis she jerked back the bolts, and pulled the door inwards.

On the step stood, suave, apologetic, her caller of two or more hours ago. He pulled off his bowler hat, the breeze lifting one sparse grey lock that crossed his domed head from right to left.

'I am so sorry to trouble you again, Mrs. Wishart. But I wondered——?'

She swallowed, and got her voice back.

'You're too late. 'E's just gone out again.'

'Oh.'

The monosyllable held either a power of meaning or no meaning at all. The caller stood, looking at Mrs. Wishart. His expression underwent a subtle, wary change. Lowering at him, unable somehow to let loose her weight of anger, she perceived dimly, then with certainty, that something was happening.

The man's posture seemed infinitesimally to relax.

'Oh,' he said again: and then, inclining nearer to her, and looking at her from pale, contracted eyes, 'Maybe that is just as well.'

There was a pause, in which Mrs. Wishart dully heard the starlings on the neighbouring telegraph wire, and the voice of her younger daughter upraised in shrill and sanctimonious protest somewhere round at the back.

The visitor made a confiding, intimate movement.

'May I step in a moment?'

Hardly knowing what she was doing, much less why, Mrs. Wishart stepped aside and held open the door. He came in, pausing to wipe his feet on the mat with the conscientious energy of a dog.

'This way.' Then, as if in her own despite, she added, 'If you don't mind the kitchen. Parlour ain't done yet.'

'On the contrary, I prefer it.' He was smiling, all set to please. 'Left to myself, I would live in a kitchen. It's the warmest place in the house, and the most comfortable, the best for meals. And so much less work afterwards. However, I need not tell *you* that, Mrs. Wishart.'

Far from soothing, these courtesies irritated Mrs. Wishart.

The bile rose again in her throat, preventing her from asking him what he wanted.

He saw this, and wasted no more time.

'However,' he smiled, and put his hat on the table. Pulling out a wallet from his inside breast pocket, he took from it a card, which he handed to Mrs. Wishart. At the same time, and as if casually, he detached a treasury note, which he slipped between the two flaps of the wallet, and laid the wallet on the table beside his hat, with the note just visible.

Observing this out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Wishart looked at the card. She could not see to read without her glasses, but by holding the card at arm's length and narrowing her eyes she could make out the larger type upon it.

'Mr. Edward Antrim,' she read. There was something else on the card, an address maybe, which she could not read. Indeed, she would hardly have got that far, if her caller had not given her his name on his first visit.

She looked at him.

'Well?' she said.

He leaned forward.

'May we sit down? It's more comfortable, I think, don't you? Thank you. Mrs. Wishart, I am going to take a risk. At least, with most people it would be a risk, a grave risk. Yet I feel I can trust to your discretion.'

Intensely suspicious now, she watched him.

'I have come to Dycer's Bay to make—shall we say—certain enquiries. Before I can usefully prosecute these enquiries, I need some—ah—preliminary information.' He cleared his throat. 'I have an idea that you can help me.'

Mrs. Wishart still said nothing.

'Any information you might be able to give me would, of course, be regarded as entirely confidential. And I think I may say that the—ah—the interests whom I am representing would not be at all ungenerous in recognising any help I might receive.'

He glanced at the wallet, and cleared his throat again.

'Take me for a nark, do yer?'

She hadn't meant to say that. It shot out from that maelstrom of resentment within her.

Mr. Antrim was shocked.

'My dear Mrs. Wishart! There is, I hope, no question of that. I have nothing to do with the police. I am here, in a private capacity, to undertake certain discreet enquiries. It struck me that you might be able to help. I need—' he made a half gesture with his hand— 'I need to get an all-round picture. I am a stranger here, do not forget. A little advice from someone like yourself, who knows the place——'

He said the last two sentences very fast, almost running the words together. It was a trick he had, to start a speech slowly, and suddenly speed up.

Mrs. Wishart jerked her thumb towards the room upstairs.

'It's 'im you mean, isn't it?'

Mr. Antrim's bland mask dispersed into lines of admiration.

'You are a very intelligent woman, Mrs. Wishart—if you will allow me to say so.' He paused, smiled, and ducked his head towards her. The words came out very softly, like a liquid, poured rather than spoken. 'For a start, then, shall I say—for a start, mind you—I would be glad to know anything you can tell me, about our friend upstairs.'

'E's no friend o' mine.' Once more the voice spoke from her depths.

Mr. Antrim looked into her eyes. His were thoughtful, watchful, yet almost without expression: red-rimmed, pale grey stones.

'I rather gathered as much,' he murmured. Then, a little louder, on a persuasive, reasonable note of relief, 'Well. That makes things easier, does it not? For us both.'

'How?'

He waved a hand.

'We can speak more freely.'

'H'm.' She was withdrawn, uncompromising. 'Wot d'ye want to know?'

'Anything. Everything. How does our friend pass his time? In what way does he make his living?'

'That,' said Mrs. Wishart with force, 'is what a good many would like to know.'

'Ah.' He regarded her attentively. 'You have no idea? Although he lives here?'

'He's up to no good, that I'll swear. Why else would 'e be so careful not to leave no traces?'

'No *traces*, Mrs. Wishart?'

'A ordinary, straightforward person, as has got nothing to hide, leaves things laying about. Anything they uses for their work, or it might be a bill, or a letter, or something of the sort.'

Mr. Antrim nodded. A slight hesitation, and the fact that she had delayed mentioning letters, gave him the clearest insight into her mind.

Mrs. Wishart leaned forward earnestly.

'A person doesn't burn their letters without they've got somethink to hide. A person doesn't keep everythink under lock and key—everythink, mind yer: not only valuables and drink and suchlike—without there's things they don't want nobody to see.'

'Quite. Quite.'

'E won't even 'ave letters directed 'ere.'

'Really, Mrs. Wishart. Where do they go, then?'

'More'n one place. The Post Office. *And* a woman as keeps a newsagent's shop. Maybe more, for all I know.'

'You will forgive me, I hope, Mrs. Wishart. But it is important to be sure that all my information is correct. May I ask if you are quite certain on these points?'

'I'm certain all right. Mrs. Alcock, she's my friend seven doors down: her sister's youngest, Susie, works in the Post Office. Says 'e gets letters by the score. 'As a box number, what they call. And I know about the other place, 'cos I sent my little Edner one day to follow after 'im and see where 'e went.'

Mr. Antrim considered this information.

'It might be, of course, that he has a mail-order business of some kind.'

Mrs. Wishart sniffed.

'If it was all above-board, why not 'ave 'em delivered 'ere?'

'A box office number is shorter. Costs less to advertise.

You don't happen to know the number, by any chance? You have not seen any advertisement in the paper?'

'I know the number all right, from Mrs. Alcock's Susie,' Mrs. Wishart said slowly. Her demon of honesty made her add, 'I never thought to look in the paper.'

'Well. There's plenty of time for that. Mr. Trevannion has, of course, his official position. But that, I imagine, cannot occupy very much of his time.'

'The insurance, you mean?'

'There is not a great volume of business in Dycer's Bay?'

'Can't say as to that. It ain't much to do with letter writin', anyway. It's goin' around and blarneyin' people who got no more sense than to listen.'

'I have heard that he has some connection with a printing business. Do you know anything about that?'

'No. I tell yer, I don't know nothin' about 'im. Oh. One thing.'

'Yes, Mrs. Wishart?'

She told him about the finding of the little weighing scales, and the powder with the agreeable taste. He looked blank for a moment.

'Did you form any conclusion, Mrs. Wishart?'

'I did,' she replied grimly.

Mr. Antrim coughed, and did not press the matter.

'Can you tell me how long Mr. Trevannion has been in Dycer's Bay?'

'Years,' she replied.

'How many? Ten? Twenty?'

'Ten years anyway. He's been a regular at 'The Peace' for that time. My 'usband used to see 'im there.'

Mr. Antrim nodded, half to himself.

'You don't know where he came from?'

'Not an idea.'

'Ah well.' He got up. 'That has been a most helpful conversation, Mrs. Wishart. Most suggestive.' He picked up his wallet, allowing the note to fall out and remain on the table. 'Should you ascertain anything definite, I trust you will let me know. I shall be staying at 'The Crown'—for some little time, I expect. I have—ah—other business here.'

He looked around the kitchen. 'If I may say so, I think it would be as well not to mention my visit to Mr. Trevannion.'

'I told 'im you called, before 'e went out.'

'This second visit, I mean. And—we shall probably get better results if you do not mention the matter to your friends. If Mr. Trevannion became aware of my interest in him, it might . . . and even the most discreet people, sometimes—'

There were limits to Mrs. Wishart's biddability.

'I'll see 'e don't suspect,' she said, in forbidding tones: and Mr. Antrim took the hint.

'I shall call again, to see him, of course,' he said.

'You won't get nothink out of 'im.'

'No. But, you see, I have business with him. Indirectly,' he added, as the pupils of Mrs. Wishart's eyes went small. 'It is always well to find out all you can beforehand of a person with whom you intend to have dealings, don't you think?'

Mrs. Wishart breathed noisily.

'Look 'ere,' she said. 'Wot is your little game? First you 'int that you been set on to find out about 'im. Now you say you got business with 'im.'

Mr. Antrim spoke very fast indeed.

'The business might be on behalf of other people, surely? It might be my duty to, let us say, a client—a single individual, a company, a corporation—it might be my duty, before opening some form of negotiation, to find out all I can about the person concerned?'

Mrs. Wishart was not impressed.

'Likely you'd 'ave business o' that kind with 'im, when you don't know wot 'is business is. Arsking 'ow 'e gets 'is living.'

Mr. Antrim smiled widely, revealing a set of obvious false teeth.

'You are, as I said once already, Mrs. Wishart, a very intelligent woman. I am sorry if I seem a little mysterious; but you will understand, I'm sure, that in my profession we have to be discreet, very, very discreet. I should no more tell anyone else's secrets than I should tell yours—if I knew

them, Mrs. Wishart, which I don't. Which I don't. Well: good-bye for the present. And, when I return, you and I have not had this very pleasant little conversation. Thank you so much. Good day.'

Mrs. Wishart stood sullenly and watched him go down the road.

'Slippery bastard,' she said to herself. 'You're a wrong 'un, I know.'

She went back to the kitchen, stood for a moment looking at the treasury note on the table, then picked it up and took it into her bedroom.

2

Coming into her parlour with Trevannion already seated there, Miss Balgannon felt at a disadvantage. On the last occasion, she had been able to compose herself in a suitable attitude of meditation, with the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning open upon her lap. Her visitor had apparently been much impressed by this evidence of sensibility, and, picking up the volume, had read aloud two Sonnets from the Portuguese in a fine baritone voice and with such feeling that Miss Balgannon was quite overcome: and had afterwards no remembrance of the steps by which he progressed from this high plane to the more prosaic subject of life insurance.

She found her visitor standing in close contemplation of her water-colour picture of St. Asaph's belfry: so close, indeed, that he did not seem to be aware of her entry. Checking herself, she gave a small cough. He started, looked round, and came bounding towards her—there was really no other word for it—with all the enthusiasm of a boy.

Before she realised, he had taken her hand in both of his, and was clasping it warmly.

'My dear Miss Balgannon! Forgive me. I was looking at one of your treasures. That water-colour of St. Asaph's. It's uncommonly good. Such feeling. Such insight. I had at one time some little knowledge of water-colours, but I must confess I can't identify the artist. His work is new to me. And that disturbs me, Miss Balgannon. That convicts

me of very serious ignorance. There is such quality in the work. No—wait.'

He held up a hand, as Miss Balgannon seemed about to speak.

'Don't tell me for a moment. Let me tell you what I think. How the picture strikes me. I dare say I shall only be exposing my ignorance—and I don't mind telling you, Miss Balgannon, that's a thing I should generally be very careful about, very careful indeed. I have my share of vanity. But somehow, with you, I don't mind. Even if you did laugh at me, it would be in the kindest and friendliest of ways, a way that would help me to laugh at myself. Now!'

Slipping her arm under his, and pressing her hand under his own broad right hand, he led her to the wall.

'Now. Standing here in front of the picture, shall I tell you what I think? No—please don't say anything till I've done. I would say'—he put his head on one side, and screwed up his eyes—'I would say that this was the work of a young artist of the highest talent and promise, whose vision outran his power to express it. There is, you see, in certain passages, a slight hint of indecision in the brush-work; something a little tentative; a suggestion, here and there, of impatience with the actual task of rendering into terms of sheer paint the glow and beauty of the vision. Yes: I would go so far as to say that, from the point of view of technique, there are even signs of immaturity. But a real, a remarkable talent. I surmise that this is an early work of one who is now a celebrity. There! Am I right, Miss Balgannon? Or have I given myself away hopelessly as an ignoramus?'

Miss Balgannon had undergone so many emotions in the course of this outpouring that it was a matter of pure chance what she said or did. In fact, she giggled.

'Well, Mr. Trevannion. I am afraid you are *not* right!'

'No?'

He frowned; peered again at the picture; then looked back at her.

'No?' he repeated. 'I need hardly say, of course, that I

believe implicitly anything you tell me. But I shall find it very hard to accept that this is not the work of an artist who has since become famous.'

She shook her head, still giggling; hearing her own giggles, knowing they were inappropriate; scared, but unable to control them.

'I'm afraid you're very wide of the mark. Yes. You see—I painted that myself.'

'You?' He gave her the full weight of his attention, his incredulity. '*You* painted that, Miss Balgannon?'

She nodded, tremulous, triumphant.

'Yes, Mr. Trevannion. Yes. Years ago.' She added, as if that might in some way mitigate his sense of error.

'Well!' he ejaculated. 'Well!' He looked again at the picture. 'Miss Balgannon; you astound me. If I knew you better'—he turned to her—'I should scold you within an inch of your life.'

She backed away, frightened, pulling at his hand that still held hers.

'But,' she fluttered, 'you wouldn't let me say. I tried to tell you at the start, truly I did. Only you would go on.'

He laughed, a rich, deep, warm laugh.

'My dear Miss Balgannon. What a poor opinion you have of me. My own fault, I know. I don't mean that I'd scold you because I made a mistake and gave myself away. Oh no. What I would scold you for—in fact,' he added, wagging a finger at her,—'what I *do* scold you for, is for painting a picture like that and not going on. Not continuing to paint. But—forgive me—perhaps you do?'

Miss Balgannon shook her head. He sighed, and released her hand.

'I thought, perhaps—as this is not signed—you might have gone on, disposing of your work elsewhere, living in seclusion, unknown to us all. It would be like you.'

'Oh no, Mr. Trevannion. It wouldn't be like me at all. I assure you, if I had such a talent, I shouldn't hide it.'

He looked at her, and spoke in humorous compassion.

'Now I can't believe you, Miss Balgannon. No. You are convicted out of your own mouth. You *have* the talent.'

The evidence is there, on the wall. And you have hidden it. You have not gone on with your studies.'

'I'm afraid you are too kind, Mr. Trevannion. You over-estimate what I did.'

'That wasn't the reputation I had when I used to write about such things. Rather the opposite. There were complaints that I was too severe.'

'Were—were you a *critic*, then, Mr. Trevannion?'

She said the word in a hushed tone of reverence.

'Let us say, Miss Balgannon, that I was a humble student of the arts, and as such was invited to record my impressions in the press. The provincial press. I must not claim more than is due to me.' He looked again at the picture. 'It is well for me that I did not come across your work in the course of my official duties, Miss Balgannon. I should have made a sorry fool of myself.'

He checked, threw up his head, and turned on his heel so suddenly as to make her jump.

'No!' he exclaimed in his deepest tones. 'No, I should not! In the world's eye, perhaps, the eye that judges only by material things, fame, success, the price a painter may charge in the catalogue. But by the real values, the true values, the eternal values, I am right. I swear it! I have not made a fool of myself. I have not given myself away. I have still the power—and I am thankful for it, thankful to have this proof of it—I have still the power to recognise the real thing, and to salute it. To recognise it even when its expression is still immature, and when its owner disclaims it. Yes, Miss Balgannon. You have a talent. Or, shall we say, you *had*. If it has come to that, then indeed I have something to scold you for.'

He stared at her, as if somehow he might read in her face the answer to his perplexity. Miss Balgannon's flutter of nervous amusement gave way to a feeling of guilt and alarm. It came across the surface of her mind like a ripple raised by a breeze upon a pool. Disappearing, it left beneath it the blank depth of inadequacy, of inability to deal with life, which was her chief legacy from her parents.

Then, unconsciously perhaps, Trevannion helped her.

'Didn't your teachers tell you you had talent? Didn't they urge you to continue?'

'Miss Elphick did suggest that I should go on. But Daddy thought I had done enough. He said she only said that because she wanted the money for more lessons.'

'Tck! tck! These parents! Either they think we are geniuses, Miss Balgannon, or they think we are no good at all. They have no objective judgment. No balance. No mean.'

'I knew it wasn't that, because she wanted me to join Mr. Prendergast's class. He used to exhibit.'

'Didn't your father know *that*?'

'I believe Mummy did tell him. But he didn't like the idea of it. It would have meant being out for meals. And he was afraid. Art students, you know.'

Trevannion nodded.

'Ah, Miss Balgannon. In their loving care of us, our parents often stood in our way. Without realising it, of course. No one would have been more horrified, if they could only have seen what they were doing. Good intentions. Good intentions.'

Miss Balgannon was relieved to feel that the blame had been lifted from her shoulders, but still uneasy in that there seemed to be some criticism of her parents. She was wondering how to say a loyal word in their defence, when an exclamation from Trevannion forestalled her.

'But, good heavens, Miss Balgannon! I must apologise. Where have my manners gone! My dear mother used to say that I was behind the door when manners were given out, and I'm afraid she was right. Do please forgive me.'

'Forgive you, Mr. Trevannion! but—what—what for?'

'For blundering my way into your private affairs like some great buffalo. For seeming to criticise you. Such impertinence! taking you to task; telling you what you should do and what you should not. I do apologise.'

'My dear Mr. Trevannion . . . please——'

They stood looking at one another. Trevannion smiled broadly. Then he laughed. In her relief and excitement,

Miss Balgannon laughed too, and, laughing, realised how near she had come to tears.

‘Allow me.’

He took her hand, and led her to a chair, into which she thankfully subsided. He sat down opposite her, took out his handkerchief, blew his nose, and wiped his big moustache. Miss Balgannon found herself trembling, not unpleasantly, less from any form of fear than from the stimulus of his male vitality. The whole room was loud with him: the familiar safe articles of furniture seemed different, charged with energy.

How the conversation would have renewed itself no one could tell, for neither showed any disposition to speak, but the problem was solved by the entrance of Lily with biscuits and Madeira. This Victorian practice, highly approved by Trevannion, Miss Balgannon had taken over from her father, who invariably offered both to his guests at all times except between the hours of three-thirty and five, when Mrs. Balgannon gave them tea.

Trevannion partook, and sighed.

‘Ah, Miss Balgannon. You cannot imagine what a paradise it is, to sit for a while in a house like this, after my lodging. A house full of beautiful objects’—he looked around the room, and continued, maybe as an amendment—‘where everything is loved and cared for: a house where the—*the grace of living is still understood.*’

Miss Balgannon glowed at this praise of her room. For perhaps the first time, he had raised an uncomplicated feeling in her breast. She did love her home. She did privately think her things were nice. He could have said nothing to please her more.

‘You live in Hawker Street, don’t you, Mr. Trevannion?’

‘I do,’ he admitted sadly.

‘And is it—so very—’

‘It is indeed. The house itself is not so bad. Architecturally. Intrinsically. But the way it is kept—well, the less said the better. And the furnishings. I have one or two things of my own, of course, or life would be quite insupportable. But—after one has been used to a better, a more

spacious way of life. . . . Well, well, I mustn't complain.' He smiled bravely. 'And I certainly didn't come here to weary you with my woes, Miss Balgannon. But—well—you can understand how much I appreciate such a room as this. What an oasis it is for a thirsty traveller.'

He clapped a hand to his mouth in mock dismay.

'That might have been better put, indeed! how my tongue does run away with me! what will I say next! It's your fault, Miss Balgannon. Oh yes, it is. You make me feel so much at home, you put me so much at my ease, I lose all sense of constraint, my tongue rattles on, and before I know what I'm saying, I've blurted out something absurd, or impertinent. Dear, dear. I'd better have another biscuit, and not talk so much.'

'But indeed, Mr. Trevannion . . . I like to hear you talk. We don't have much company here, Lily and I. It's quite a treat.'

She was warm and eager now, like a girl, set at her ease, almost, by his belief that he had committed a solecism in her company.

'I don't know what it is, Miss Balgannon; but—may I be personal? It seems to me I've been very little else, ever since I came into the room, but still—well—'

He stared down at his boot, as if fumbling for words. Then, with a sort of boyish jerk of the head, he looked up into Miss Balgannon's large eyes.

'I have had not altogether an easy life, Miss Balgannon. I don't want to say too much about it, but I've taken some hard knocks in my time. I've—well, I've been hurt'—he was looking away from her now—'and I've learned to keep my own counsel. I've learned, by bitter experience, not to give myself away: not to show my feelings. I've learned caution, and it's become a habit. I don't know you at all well, Miss Balgannon (though I feel I know you a good deal better than the short time we have had together warrants). Yet with you I feel that all the acquired caution, the hard protective shell seems to dissolve away, and I find myself speaking without any reserve at all. It's a queer feeling.'

He looked at her, opening his eyes wide.

'It's almost frightening. At least, if it was in front of anyone but you, it would be. I—I'm saying too much, Miss Balgannon. You must stop me. But let me say just one thing more. It's such a relief to feel at last that, in the presence of at least one human being, one need not keep a suspicious guard upon one's tongue. In your presence, I don't mind how much I give myself away.'

He pulled out his silk handkerchief, and mopped his brow. Before Miss Balgannon could collect herself for a reply, he began to talk rapidly of other things, telling her stories about the town, asking whether Stan's behaviour to Lily was what a conscientious mistress would desire, praising Stan for an honest, straightforward lad—'not *overburdened* with brains, Miss Balgannon, but there, we mustn't expect everything. "Kind hearts are more than coronets"'—a sentiment with which Miss Balgannon warmly agreed, though she could not help wondering, in some small corner of her mind, what Stan would look like in a coronet—telling her a droll anecdote of his landlady, which really made her laugh, and then, in the midst of their merriment, fetching a pensive sigh, and speaking of his hope that soon perhaps he might find more pleasant quarters.

At the end of this speech there was a silence. Miss Balgannon's heart began to beat very fast, as the idea which Trevannion had been labouring to inject into her mind took life there. Then, judging that he had said enough for one session, Trevannion exclaimed, and rose to his feet.

'How inconsiderate of me, Miss Balgannon! I have stayed far longer than I meant. Forgive me.'

'My dear Mr. Trevannion . . . but please . . . that is, won't you—'

'It's just your meal-time. I must go off to my frugal sandwich and glass. They look after me very well at 'The Peace'.'

'Do you mean to say your landlady doesn't even—'

Trevannion shook his head, smiling.

'Occasionally, a tray. For the most part, I look after myself. As I said, they are good to me at 'The Peace'.'

Sometimes I have a hot plate, when there is something appetising. Now and then I have a chop with Walter Nutchery, or with the landlord.'

'I was going to ask you if perhaps you would join me . . . take pot-luck, as my father used to say—'

'Not to-day, Miss Balgannon: bless your kind heart for the thought. I have inflicted myself on you quite long enough as it is—and said a whole heap of things I had no intention of saying.'

'You must come soon, then. Very soon. I can't bear to think of you not getting your proper meals.'

'I'd love to come, Miss Balgannon. I'd be only too delighted. But please, please don't think I'm complaining. I mustn't have your pity on false pretensions. I do very well, I assure you. And, as I said, they are good to me at 'The Peace'. Well—good-bye. And thank you so much. No: I can let myself out.'

He pressed her hand once more between his, and departed with a flourish.

Miss Balgannon, watching from behind the curtain, thought admiringly what fine broad shoulders he had. She was all disturbed, the thoughts flying in her mind like sheets of paper in a gale. Yet, confused and chaotic though they were, she had time to wonder what exactly he was thanking her for, and then, in the wake of that thought, she remembered his telling her he had said all sorts of things he never intended, and wondered what he had intended; what was his reason for calling. As far as she could remember, he had never given one.

She turned on Lily a face of gentle bewilderment.

'I asked Mr. Trevannion to stay to lunch, but he wouldn't.'

'It's as well, ma'am,' Lily told her. 'We have only the rest of the rabbit: and gentlemen require such a lot.'

'Yes. Yes, indeed. But I'm sorry—Lily, would you believe it, but his landlady doesn't cook him any dinner! He must be terribly uncomfortable. He said it was so nice here.'

Mistress and maid exchanged glances, and each looked away, hastily, as from a thought too momentous, too terrifying to be uttered.

Trevannion, strolling down the road, was well satisfied with himself. I tickled the old girl nicely, he reflected. Didn't go too far. Would have been a mistake to ask openly for the room the first time. Just put the idea in her head. Prepare the way for it so that, when it does come up, she'll think it's been there all the time. Yes. That went nicely. Tickled her up well.

He had; just a little too well. His visit, the memory of his handclasp, the deep tones of his voice, his broad burly presence in her chair, had deeply disturbed Miss Balgannon. Disturbance frightened her, and, left to herself, she began to shrink away from the magnetic source of it. Trevannion put her in conflict with herself. Miss Balgannon's nurture and her experience of life had not been of a kind to fit her for adventure. Here was a possible source of upheaval stronger even than Mr. Murrough; and goodness knows, she had lain awake often enough in terror of what he might do.

To bring such a disturbing element into her house, just as she had got used to having it quiet again! She shivered at the thought. Yet, poor Mr. Trevannion. . . . In a misery of fear and guilt, the unfortunate lady walked about her room, picking things up, putting them down again, her fingers fluttering with trapped helplessness. And, all the time, deep down, she was indignant to be put in such a turmoil. Why couldn't she be let *alone*?

Not till Lily came in with a cup of tea for her, with kind and soothing words—Lily, who always knew by instinct when she was in a state—did she get back a measure of calm.

'Dear Lily,' she said, tremulously. 'What would I do without you!'

IV

TREVANNION and his visitor eyed each other across the width of threadbare carpet.

'I am sorry, Mr. Antrim, that I have no more comfortable place in which to receive you.' Trevannion grimaced round his room. 'The amenities, as you see, are primitive.'

Mr. Antrim smiled.

'I have been in a great many rooms in my time, Mr. Trevannion. The only important thing to me is the welcome I get.'

'That, surely, must depend on your errand?'

Mr. Antrim's smile broadened.

'A reply after my own heart. I find myself liking you already, Mr. Trevannion. Well. I won't beat about the bush.'

They looked into each other's eyes, Trevannion with an appearance of polite, casual interest which Mr. Antrim inwardly commended. It was the gaze of a crook who, having at the moment nothing to fear, could afford to be unconcerned.

'You are wondering why I have come to see you. I will set your mind at rest. It is not in any official capacity.'

Trevannion inclined his head.

'You are, I believe, a solicitor, Mr. Antrim?'

'I have not come in that role.'

'Ah. You do not practise now?'

Mr. Antrim smiled again.

'I have not practised for some little while. Such advice as I have given has been—er—'

'—Unofficial. Quite.'

The atmosphere was taut with a wary, feline tension. For a few seconds neither spoke.

'In virtue of my legal experience, I am occasionally asked to undertake enquiries.'

'Private enquiries?'

'Discreet enquiries. Sometimes on behalf of individuals, sometimes for official bodies.'

'I see. And your present mission?'

'You will be the better able to classify it when I tell you what it is.'

'And how I am concerned in it.'

'Oh, *you* are not concerned in it, Mr. Trevannion. Please put any such idea right out of your head.'

'In that case——?'

'—Why do I intrude upon you? I am coming to that.' He chuckled. 'I wish sometimes there were no such thing as professional loyalty, Mr. Trevannion.'

'You surprise me, Mr. Antrim.'

Mr. Antrim refused to rise.

'I could explain things to you much more fully and clearly if there were not. As it is, I'll have to rely a good deal on your understanding. However, you have shown me, in the course of a couple of minutes, that it is in excellent working order.'

Trevannion bowed.

'Well, not to put too fine a point on it, Mr. Trevannion, Dycer's Bay is a town—shall we say—of decided individuality. It has its own way of doing things. This—er—individuality extends to its conduct of municipal affairs. The system of finance, for instance, the administrative machinery, has certain local features——'

'We like to do things in our own odd way.'

'You do indeed. And you are welcome to: except in so far as, occasionally, other interests may be affected.'

Trevannion looked at him without expression.

'Which of the two banks have you in mind?'

Mr. Antrim raised a deprecating hand.

'Don't let us go *too* fast, Mr. Trevannion. Let us say, for the moment, that when money has been invested——'

'Loaned.'

'Loaned, if you prefer; when this has been done, the lender is legitimately interested in the way in which the capital sum is being used.'

'Especially if the lender is a bank.'

'Any lender, I think, may properly be concerned for the safety of his capital. The mere payment of the interest will not satisfy him, if rumours come to his ears that the ultimate repayment of the loan is endangered.'

'You've heard it put as plainly as that, have you?'

'Oh, please, Mr. Trevannion, please! I was only stating a hypothetical case. You really must not assume——'

He let his voice die away, and regarded Trevannion with a smile that slipped into mockery.

Trevannion moved in his chair.

'If you are here with a reason, Mr. Antrim, you may as well be frank. Otherwise we are both wasting our time.'

Mr. Antrim raised both hands a few inches from his knees, spread the fingers, and let his hands sink again. His lips softly framed the words 'Professional loyalty', and he smiled.

'I see,' Trevannion said. 'Anything explicit in this conversation, I have to say. Very well. I will oblige you. The parties who have been so improvident as to lend money to this derelict midden (God knows what security they thought they had for it) have now come to their senses, and want to know what chance they stand of getting any of it back. Despairing——'

'—Really, Mr. Trevannion, my dear sir, really, I——'

'—Despairing of finding out by any form of direct and straightforward enquiry, they call upon you.'

'If,' tittered Mr. Antrim, 'I were the sort of man to take offence——'

'And you, for reasons I cannot pretend to fathom, you come to me. Now: may we go on from there?'

Mr. Antrim laughed and nodded, hands on knees, shaking with silent appreciation. His protests had hardly even been feigned, so formal were they, so mocking, so full of delight. It could not be said that he beamed, his countenance was too smooth, too crafty; but it wore a look of enjoyment and compliment which on other features might have deserved the word.

'Capital,' he breathed at last. 'A trifle summary. A shade imaginative. A little on the vivid side. But capital. Now:

will you let me give you another version? More sober; duller perhaps; but in closer accord with the facts?’

‘It will be interesting to see how you dish it up. But, really, you needn’t bother.’

‘Oh, I think, in the interest of truth—academically, shall we say—I must put my version on record.’

Suddenly, for no reason that could be guessed, the smile was wiped off Mr. Antrim’s face. He spoke curtly.

‘Your picture is too sensational. Nevertheless, I admit, the interests which I represent have received disquieting reports, from more than one source, as to the conduct of municipal business here.’

‘They might well.’

‘Obviously, as you said just now, any form of direct enquiry would be worse than useless. Even supposing, as we have been given to understand, there were disharmony between the parties concerned, a question from outside, and on so vital a matter, could only unite them in resistance against the questioner; and everything would be covered up.’

Trevannion nodded.

‘That being so, I have been asked, quite unofficially, to come here for a while, to mix with people, to glean any information I can.’

‘I don’t see that your account of the position differs very substantially from mine.’

‘My first step,’ continued Mr. Antrim, holding up a hand, ‘is to find someone knowledgeable who is not in any way connected with the administration which is in question. I enquire about, and, as a result of my enquiries, I come to you.’

‘Why should you think that I am willing to help you? Even supposing that I can?’

Mr. Antrim grinned.

‘Public spirit? Your own interest? A desire to see the activities of certain persons curtailed? A sense of abstract justice?’

Trevannion did not respond to the grin.

‘Three of those leave me cold, and I am not at all convinced about the fourth. Let us be quite clear, Mr. Antrim.

You are not in business for your health. Neither am I. It doesn't matter a halfpenny to me who does what, in this God-forsaken dump, as long as he doesn't interfere with me. As to public spirit—why should I care if some institution has had the criminal folly to invest moneys entrusted to it in Dycer's Bay? As to power, and cutting short the antics of this or that petty ruffian: I'm too old to worry about that sort of thing. No, Mr. Antrim. You hint that it may be to my interest to help you. I must ask you to establish that it will be. Then we can talk. If I *can* help you; which I doubt.'

Mr. Antrim considered, his head on one side.

'I think you will be able to help me. With your acquaintance, I can move about freely and meet people of different kinds: particularly those whom I wish to meet. I mean, people who may be inclined to talk, in ways that will seem harmless to them, but may be highly informative to me. As to its being to your interest, you are the best judge of that. The party whom I represent has placed certain resources at my disposal: but I imagine,' he added, very quickly, 'that you will prefer something more indirect.'

'If you mean that you are thinking of offering me money to betray my fellow townsmen——'

Mr. Antrim slapped his knees.

'I am disappointed in you, Mr. Trevannion. You should at least be consistent.'

'Am I not?'

'A minute ago, you were telling me that you were not concerned with the antics of your fellow townsmen, but only with your own interest. Now you go all noble and talk about betraying them—which I never asked you to do.' He leaned forward. 'Sponsor me, Mr. Trevannion. Sponsor me among your circle of friends—your various circles—and I will see you do not lose by it.'

'Sponsoring an informer is not likely to endear a man to his friends.'

'Is that a happy epithet, Mr. Trevannion? Is it justified?'

'Call yourself what you like,' Trevannion said, with a shrug. 'Private investigator, sleuth——'

'I prefer either of those, certainly.'

'Any fancy name you like for a man who comes to ferret out some misdemeanour and denounce the doer of it: offering first to grease the paw of anyone he thinks will help him.'

Mr. Antrim pursed up his loose lips.

'Really, you know, we shall get nowhere by calling each other names. Come, come! We are both free lances, men of the world. I understand you. You understand me. You have made a sufficient demonstration of your integrity. I don't blame you. After all, you had never seen me till half an hour ago. I have been frank with you, put my cards on the table. Will you help me, or not?'

Trevannion looked meditatively at the finger-nails of his right hand, holding it up so as to see them better.

'Yes,' he said.

Mr. Antrim smiled, and rubbed his hands.

'Good. I hoped you would say that. Good. That gives me very great satisfaction. If you had refused, I should think that I had bungled matters very badly.'

He paused, eyeing Trevannion, and moving his hands rhythmically up and down on his knees. He tittered, and leant forward confidentially.

'Tell me,' he said, 'what put into your head that absurd notion that my concern was with your good self? What made you think I was after you?'

'I didn't give a damn if you were,' Trevannion replied easily. 'There was nothing for you to find.'

'Oh? You are lucky, Mr. Trevannion. Even the best of us has something he doesn't wish pried into.'

'That only holds good for people whose livelihood depends on their reputation. Clergymen, teachers, doctors. And solicitors.'

'*And solicitors!*' Mr. Antrim laughed delightedly. 'Aha! very pretty. You have me there. But—come now, Mr. Trevannion. *Nothing* to hide? Nothing you wouldn't like anyone to poke into? What about that little affair with Potts and Fulbrook?'

Trevannion's eyelids did not flicker. 'Well—what about it? It was perfectly in order.'

'Yes, yes, I know. But the relatives kicked up rather a fuss, didn't they?'

'They had no cause. I had done all I contracted to do.'

'People misunderstand so,' Mr. Antrim agreed soothingly. 'All the same, I should have thought—well, you are lucky. I mean, in having nothing to fear from scrutiny. Men of the kind we were talking about, and men with families, and positions in society—they have reason to be afraid. You and I are anxious only if we have broken the law.'

He turned and waved a hand towards the books on top of the secretary.

'I make a practice, as you do, of consulting legal authority on all my actions. Almost all.'

'You are very wise, Mr. Trevannion. I may perhaps be able to supplement these admirable volumes on occasion?' Trevannion got up.

'A dram, Mr. Antrim, to celebrate—I was about to say our confederacy, but that would make us confederates, and you are tender on matters of vocabulary. So let us say, our happy collaboration.'

Mr. Antrim bowed.

'I have only two glasses,' Trevannion went on, 'and they do not match. In fact, one is cracked. I will take it, as I know its dangers. Now, Mr. Antrim. To our happy collaboration.'

Mr. Antrim's lips softly caressed the words.

'To—our—happy—collaboration,' he breathed, and drank.

2

Mr. Walter Nutchery crouched over the billiard table of 'The Peace of God' public house, practising losing hazards. He had taken off his coat, and pulled his soiled shirt-sleeves back from his bony wrists. His left hand, as he placed it on the table to make a bridge, had an individual beauty: the powerful light from above beat down on it, throwing it into relief, articulating with dark shadow the long slender fingers. Bent low over the cue, so low that it almost grazed his chin, he had an uncanny, almost terrifying look of efficiency and purpose.

The cue struck, delicately and with precision, and the white ball shot forward. It met the red, leaped off, and went on its sure deflected path to the left-hand top pocket. The red ball at the same moment set off on a journey of its own, which brought it back by way of three cushions to within an inch of the place it had left.

Walter repeated the shot with the other ball. Once again, his eyes followed the red on its course. He did not bother even to glance at the white. Its going into the pocket he took for granted.

This time the red did not come quite so far up the table. Walter straightened up, and sighed. Seen upright, his pose of intense concentration gone, he was revealed as a quiet-looking man of middle height, slender, clean shaven, his rather long hair just beginning to be touched with grey. The upper part of the face was that of a thinker, with a fine brow and a cleanly carved, aquiline nose: but their effect was a little spoiled by a gentle, sensitive mouth and a weak chin. One would have put him down as an artist of some kind, not very successful: a painter of miniatures, a small-part actor, a pianist in a teashop; or, perhaps, a photographer.

In fact, he was a professional billiard player. This, in Dycer's Bay, was not a very remunerative career, and Walter, though an artist on the table, had not the temperament for successful match play, and so was debarred from more than local fame. By combining his profession with that of piano-tuner, and by keeping the publican's books for him, he made enough to live on, and would have been wholly contented, so his neighbours said, had not his wife cherished ideas on a larger scale. Mrs. Nutchery was a woman of strong character, and suffered indignantly the obscurity of her station. She never came near 'The Peace', as everyone called it, and Walter's friends and customers knew of her views by report only. Walter himself never complained. He seldom complained about anything. His temper was even and gentle; everybody liked him.

He walked round the table, collected the two white balls

from the top pocket, put the red where he wanted it, and once more addressed himself to the stroke. Instantly the man was transformed. There was a deadly earnestness in the pose, a fluid energy in the movement of the one arm, a line of pure movement extending to the sure and controlled flight of the two balls, that raised the finished act to a high significance, making it a momentary image of perfection. In the elaborate detail of its setting, the far-fetched coincidence of green cloth, rubber, ivory, light, and polished slate, the lunatic specialisation of skill and energy that could in no way advance man's progress, it was the product of centuries of sophistication, an epitome, perverse, needless, and beautiful, of that assault upon what is difficult, by which human beings are for ever trying to justify their hold on life.

Four times the player repeated the shot. Then the red ball came up too far.

'It's difficult,' he said, half to himself.

Stan, who was sitting at the side of the room, looked up dully.

'What is?'

'This shot. This tactic. Remember George Gray, the Australian? No: you'd hardly have seen him. Ever hear how he made his big breaks? He got the red here—see?—high up the table, so as to leave a half ball shot into either of the middle pockets. Red went to the top cushion, came back to the same place—or as near as no matter—and left the same shot again. No reason why he should ever stop, you'd say. You'd be right, too: except that a man isn't a machine. Now and then he wouldn't play strong enough, and the red would stop too far down. Then he'd play the shot I've just been playing: loser into one of the top pockets, and bring the red back into position. Other times'—Walter was warming to his theme—'he'd play too strong, and the red'd come up too far. *Then* he'd have a very tricky shot. Play ve-ry fine on the red, ve-ry soft, just sneak into the middle pocket, and send the red three or four inches only, back to the proper place. Pretty, eh?'

Stan grunted. He was staring straight in front of him,

his large red hands dangling over his knees. Walter played a few more shots.

'Got the blues?' he enquired, walking round the table.

'Um,' Stan said.

Walter played a beautiful slow screw cannon.

'Been to "The Beeches"?'

'No.' Stan roused a little. 'Go there Sunday.' He looked reproachfully at Walter's back view. 'That don't give me the 'ump.'

Walter went to the head of the table and chalked his cue.

'What's wrong, then?'

'Fed up,' Stan said.

'Any particular reason?'

The voice was light and casual. Walter left a gap of seconds between each question. It was hard work to get Stan talking, yet he would be grateful if one could.

'What's biting you?' Walter went on, after another shot.

Stan gulped once or twice. He moved as if his whole body protested against the strain of being asked to frame a definite answer.

'Something I 'eard,' he jerked out at last.

'Oh.' Walter went on playing. 'What was it?'

The red, puzzled face was turned to him.

''Bout my fight Tuesday week.'

'Not off, is it?'

'No. T'aint off.' He gulped again. 'Fight's on, all right.'

'Well then?'

'It's 'bout the bloke I got to fight. Sid Prodger.'

'They trying to scare you? Telling you how good he is? That's an old trick. Someone from his camp, I expect.'

'No. It ain't that. I reckon he is good. Pretty good, that is. I mean—I reckon I got a chance with 'im. But—'

Walter tried a *massé* shot, and missed by the fraction of an inch. He eyed his ball thoughtfully, raised an eyebrow at it, then looked across the table at the dejected Stan.

Stan gave him a quick, hunted glance. Walter smiled. It was a smile of pure friendliness, gentle, encouraging. It suggested an endless patience.

Under its stimulus Stan gulped so loudly, so convulsively, he might have been swallowing one of the billiard balls.

'It's what I 'eard,' he said. 'I 'eard as Sid was goin' to take a dive.'

'Do what, Stan?'

'Take a dive. Throw the fight. Lay down.'

Walter bent again, and played a cannon.

'Why should he do that?'

'Paid to.'

'There won't be much betting on the fight, will there?'

'Shouldn't 'a thought so.'

'Then, why would anyone—?' He made another cannon, and went on, 'In any case, even if it's true, I don't see what *you've* got to worry about. You're going to win, for certain.'

'Ar. But——'

'But what?'

Stan put his hands down, and levered himself forward on the settle. The movement seemed to brace him for speech.

'It ain't good to win crooked.'

'Good for you, Stan. I agree. Fair play's a jewel.'

'Yus, I know. But I wasn't only thinkin' o' that. It don't do you no good in the game. No matter if you wasn't the one who done it, you been in a crooked fight, see, and it comes back on you.'

'Try to knock him out first, then. Before he can lie down. Eh?'

Stan shook his head. .

'No one'd never believe it. The boys'd know the fight was crooked. They'd think he was shammin'.'

'Not if you do it quick enough. He'd want to make some sort of a show, wouldn't he? Otherwise, who'd give him another fight?'

'Maybe,' Stan said doubtfully. 'But that isn't the real thing that's botherin' me.'

'No?' Walter was now making a sequence of close cannons, coaxing the balls with an exquisite delicacy of touch. 'What is it, then?'

'No. What's troublin' me—' Stan scowled at the floor—

'what's troublin' me is, what's behind it. Like what you said. Why are they doin' it?'

'I've no idea, I'm afraid.'

'I 'ave.'

'Have you, Stan? What is it?'

Stan raised a troubled face. 'You recklect I told you, I got to fight Sid; then, if I do Sid, I fight Sailor Berridge; and if I do 'im, I'm to get a match with Young Woodlock.'

'Yes.'

'Well.' Stan looked at him fixedly. 'See it now?'

Walter smiled and shook his head.

'I ain't much cop as a fighter,' Stan said. 'I'm a pre-lim'nary boy. Oh yes, you don't 'ave to tell me. I know. 'Ere in Dycer's Bay they can make out I'm a bit above it, but when I fights in a big place, I'm in the first fight in the bill, or else the last.'

'You're young, Stan. You haven't been at the game long. You're on the up and up.'

Stan looked at him hungrily, his eyes full of a longing to believe. Then the light faded out of them.

'I can't seem to get 'old of the idea. When a bloke's paid to take a dive, it's cos they want the other bloke to win, ain't it? Well—why for would Gus want me to win?'

'Didn't you say you had two more fights, if you did win?'

'That's right. Now, if I was doin' a come-back, and they wanted to build me up a bit, like, so's they could make a good match for me, that'd be one thing, I'd understand that. But I ain't doin' no come-back. I've never bin nowhere to come back to.'

'Don't they sometimes build up a young boxer in the same way?'

Stan shook his head. 'If 'e's good, 'e don't want no build up. It pays 'em better to match 'im wiv a good boy, who reckons 'e'll be easy. Then they gets long odds and wins a packet on 'im, if 'e does the good boy, see?'

'Yes,' said Walter. 'I see.'

'Only one other class o' bloke they does a build up for,' Stan went on: and stopped and swallowed.

'Yes, Stan.'

'That's a bloke who ain't never goin' to be no good.'

Walter made a couple more cannons.

'How do you make that out?'

'Stands to reason, don't it? S'pose I'm Gus, see. I gets a cut on what each boy makes as I gets bookings for.'

'I thought Ted looked after you?'

'He do, for trainin' and such. But Ted can't get me the fights. I fights under Gus's management. Well, pretend I'm Gus. I says to myself, that there Stan, 'e won't never amount to much. I don't stand to make nothin' out of 'im. I'll drop 'im, I says. But I'll get a few quid out of 'im first. I'll get 'im a match with a good boy as is 'andled by a pal o' mine. That means a bit of a build up, so as the patrons'll swaller it, but I can easy fix that, I says to myself. The good boy'll give 'im such a doin' 'e won't fight no more, but I shall 'ave 'ad a profit orf 'im, so that's 'is funeral.'

Stan looked mournfully at his companion.

'That's the way of it, I reckon, mate,' he said. 'Gus will pay so low as 'e can for the two build-up fights. 'Tother promoter will pay for the last, Gus will 'ave 'is cut, and—' His voice tailed away. 'It means 'e'll *want* me to lose.'

'I don't see that, Stan. Even if all you say is true, the winner gets most of the purse—so Gus would get a bigger cut if you won?'

Stan smiled sadly.

'If a boy what's in the money fights a boy what nobody ever 'eard of, 'e 'as a guarantee, win, lose, or draw. It'll be all the same to 'im. Gus is matchin' me with Young Woodlock, if I wins them other two fights: and Young Woodlock is near championship class.'

So gloomy was the note of fate in Stan's voice, so taken aback was Walter to hear such reflections from one whom all looked upon as innocent and guileless, that he was convinced in his own despite. He pulled himself together, and tried to rally Stan.

'You're making all this depend on what you heard being true, you know.'

'Eh?'

'That Sid Whatsisname had been paid to lie down. Who told you? Trev?'

'Trev?' Stan stared. 'Wot do Trev know about it?'

'That mightn't stop him.'

'No. It wasn't Trev. It were some blokes in the gym.'

'Maybe they said it on purpose, to put you off. That's it, Stan. They want you to lose the first fight. They're afraid you'll win, so they tell you Sid is going to lie down, so that you'll think you've got the fight in your pocket, and give him a chance to take you by surprise. That's it, depend upon it.'

Stan considered this. His colour deepened.

'You reckon it might be that?'

'Sure of it, Stan. Sure of it. Come to think of it, I've heard of that happening. I've heard of boxers trying all sorts of tricks like that, to take a man off his guard. I've heard of a boxer sending a message to his opponent, saying he wasn't well, he'd hurt his hand or something, and asking the opponent to let him make a show for two or three rounds: and then, when the opponent did, try to knock him out. That's what it is, Stan. They're afraid of you, and it's a plot to make you take things too easy.'

'Might be,' Stan said thoughtfully. 'Might be.'

'You make up your mind that it is,' Walter adjured him. 'Then you're all right either way. You do your best, fight clean, go all out to win, and you've nothing to worry about.' He stood, holding his cue upright. 'I'm not much of a one to give advice, Stan boy, but I'll tell you my only rule, and it's saved me a lot of worry. Just go ahead and do what you think is right, and then, whatever happens, you don't have to worry. You've got three fights. Well, go ahead to win. If you do win, grand. If you don't, you've done all you can do, and no one can do any more.'

Stan breathed deeply.

'Thanks, Wally,' he said. 'You done me good.'

He looked up, his eyes suffused. Walter smiled at him affectionately. There was a short silence, which neither knew how to break. Then voices sounded in the passage. Walter began to whistle softly, and returned to his practising.

A moment later Trevannion shoved open the door, and ushered in Mr. Antrim.

'Ah,' he exclaimed. 'We are not the first. Ah, Walter. Ah, Stanley. Permit me to introduce my friend Mr. Antrim. Mr. Antrim—this is my good friend Walter Nutchery, the billiard player. An artist with the cue. Walter—my legal friend, Mr. Antrim.'

Walter bowed. He did not come round the table, or relinquish his cue.

'How do you do, Mr. Antrim.'

'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Nutchery.'

'And this,' Trevannion said, as Walter returned to his cannons, 'is Stanley Gummick, the pugilist, whose reputation bids fair to spread far beyond our confines. He is not invariably successful, but——'

'None of us is,' Walter put in, 'or we wouldn't be here.'

Trevannion gave him a glance of reproof.

'Nevertheless,' he said, 'friend Stanley is undeniably rising in his profession. He has just been matched, so he tells me, for a series of important contests. Is not that correct, Stanley?'

Stan mumbled awkwardly, and shook Mr. Antrim's hand.

'We are a select company, are we not, Stanley?' Trevannion went on. 'This, so to speak, is our club. Here we spend our evenings, happy in each other's company. We might be termed the Regulars.' He beamed on them. 'Mr. Antrim has come to the town on legal business. He will, I hope, be making a protracted stay.'

Stan looked at Mr. Antrim without enthusiasm. His mind was still too full of the conversation he had just had to focus readily on anything new: and what small part of it was free did not feel drawn to the smooth, bald face and ingratiating manner of the newcomer. Walter went on practising, and whistling softly to himself between shots.

'Mr. Antrim,' pursued Trevannion, 'out of the wealth of his legal experience, will be able to advise you on your contract with the boxing promoter, Mr.—ah—what is his name?'

'Vupsey. Gus Vupsey.'

'Ah yes. An unusual name.' Trevannion repeated it to himself, his lips caressing the syllables, as if they gave him a peculiar pleasure. 'Mr. Antrim will be able—should you desire it—to scrutinise your written arrangements with Mr. Vupsey.'

Mr. Antrim bowed and smiled. Stan muttered something inaudible: so that Mr. Antrim, after watching him expectantly for a couple of seconds, relaxed, and turned his attention to the table.

Walter, finding a good position, had begun to make a break. On the brilliant green lawn the balls ran smoothly to do his bidding. Effortless and inevitable it all seemed, beyond chance of error or breakdown, every shot simple and pre-ordained, the cue ball running magnetised into the pocket, the object ball going always to a place where it would leave its master an easy shot to follow. The whole personality of the player seemed to flow out and be expressed in this arabesque, this graceful obedient pattern in which the three spinning globes of ivory carried out his will. The table was his universe, in which, a capricious god, he sent his moons on accurate tangential errands. There, on the table, was Walter Nutchery the artist: there he expressed the ordained beauty of his ideal world.

Not till he reached the eighties was there a shot that looked difficult to the watchers. Misjudging the strength of a follow-through cannon, Walter left the red in an awkward position, close to the cushion on the far side from his own ball. The white lay badly for a cannon off two cushions at the top end, near the spot, and, even if he made it, the requisite force would scatter the balls and leave them at opposite ends of the table.

Without hesitation Walter played an angle shot off the cushion, potting the red into the middle pocket on his own side of the table. Trevannion and Mr. Antrim broke into delighted exclamations, for the red, replaced on the spot, left an easy cannon.

The break flowed on smoothly from that point until, at a hundred and forty, Walter began to hesitate which shot to play.

'Ah. I thought he could not keep it up,' Trevannion whispered to Mr. Antrim. 'He becomes nervous after a while.'

The player heard, and his eyelids flickered. He was hesitating between a cannon which might lead to trouble, or a delicate and very difficult shot which would restore position. Tightening his lips, he addressed himself to the latter—a fine in-off the red into the left-hand middle pocket. The barest touch, with lots of check side and just enough strength to take the ball to the pocket . . .

They held their breaths. The red ball was little more than shaken, and the white, having flicked it so lightly there was hardly a sound, crept towards the pocket, slowly, slowly—just reached the far lip—and, as they were about to cry, 'Hard luck', the spin gripped the cushion, and the ball curled in.

'Shot, sir. Shot!'

'Magnificent!'

Walter laughed. 'Sorry to disappoint you, Trev.'

'My dear Walter. You misinterpret me entirely. I——'

He broke off, as Walter bent for the next shot. As if released by his success, he began to play fast and carelessly, breaking down finally on a red winner at a hundred and seventy-eight.

He smiled at their plaudits, hung up his cue, put on his coat, and came to sit with them.

'Walter,' Trevannion exclaimed to Mr. Antrim, 'is a true artist. In fact, I think I may say—may I not, Walter?—that it is his artistry which has held him back from the highest honours. Not only has he the artistic temperament, in a very remarkable degree, a sensitiveness and nervousness which make him vulnerable in the rough and tumble of match play: but he often cannot resist the beautiful, the difficult, the exquisite shot, of the kind we saw him make just now, when something less spectacular would leave a better position and so be more strictly the game. An artist, not a tradesman. Eh, Walter?'

Walter smiled, and felt in his pocket for a cigarette.

'Daresay you're right, Trev. Though, as it happened, that shot *was* the game. For once.'

'You'd have had a go at it, whether it was or not. Irresistible. Sympathy if you failed: applause if you succeeded.'

'Nice character he gives me, Mr. Antrim. Cigarette?'

'Thank you. I don't smoke.'

'Wise man. Wish I didn't. Stan?—Oh, I forgot, you're in training. What d'you say, Trev?'

'I was saying it's a most natural thing. An amiable foible. Which of us does not like applause? Besides, in your case, it is good business. You will never be the stolid, efficient type of player, the mere scoring machine. It is as the artist, the pure stroke player that you excel. Therefore it pays you to exhibit your speciality. Even if you lose, you impress.'

Walter blew a series of rings, and tilted his head to watch them.

'I never met Trev's match for rubbing in the fact that a man's a failure, and making a compliment of it. It's a wonderful gift. He cultivates it, too.'

'My dear Walter. You are being pleasant.'

'If Stan loses a fight, Trev'll say what courage he showed standing up to a man in a different class from himself. One of our friends here drives a car for a garage. Steady and careful a driver as you could find. He had an accident a while back. A tight chap on a motor bike drove into him: it wasn't his fault. You should have heard Trev here, telling him we were his friends whatever happened, and no one would think the worse of him, and even the best of us made an error of judgment sometimes, and, if anything happened, we'd look after his wife and kids till he came out. Quite a shock to you when he was exonerated, wasn't it, Trev?'

Trevannion laughed indulgently.

'You will have your joke, Walter. You will have your joke. Pay no attention to him, Mr. Antrim. A humourist. A licensed jester.'

Walter surveyed him, his eyes twinkling. Mr. Antrim, puzzled by the contrast between what was said and the easy good-humour of the tone, kept to his enigmatic smile.

A short silence was broken by the entrance of Joe Blake, the landlord, from a door leading out of the bar. Joe was

an Irishman. He had come over as a young man to Chester, taken a job as barman, and made money from racing tips given him by his customers, with whom his quiet dependability had made him a favourite. Deciding on the advice of one of them to better himself, he had seen an advertisement of 'The Peace', came to inspect it, bought it on impulse, and settled in Dycer's Bay. The living it gave him was not fat, but Joe was his own master, and had leisure to pursue his hobbies, carpentry and fishing. He could also play upon a one-string fiddle reinforced by a tin horn, like a gramophone, producing true but piercing notes which even the emollient accompaniment of a harmonium or piano-accor-dion could not subdue. They kept their peculiar quality, like an acid fruit which no amount of sugar will disguise.

'Well, gentlemen,' Joe greeted them. 'And what can I do for you?'

He had a red face, a short black moustache, and sleepy, dull eyes behind which a realistic common sense was at work. People liked Joe because he let them be, and, in a comfortable sort of way, took them for granted. He looked after you unobtrusively and made you feel at home. Even when at last he refused to serve you, on the ground that you had enough taken, as he put it, he managed always to convey a note of solicitude into the refusal. He seemed to be conspiring with you to maintain your comfort, your dignity, your welfare. He helped you to keep up appearances. The number of people to whom Joe had been a good angel was surprising, and, apart from a reassuring ordinariness and solidity, he looked an unlikely candidate for the job.

Trevannion ordered beer for Mr. Antrim, Walter, and himself, in a manner suggesting that it was imperial Tokay. Stan had to be content with a soft drink. Rallied by Trevannion on his asceticism, he grinned sheepishly, and protested that beer might make him overweight.

They began to talk about boxing, and boxers' foibles in training. Joe, returning with the drinks, told an anecdote of Jem Roche. Stan at once became another person. All diffidence and hesitation gone, he poured forth a flood of biographical detail. His face crimson, his small eyes aglow,

his voice hushed to a note of eager reverence, he showed a positive erudition, not only on the great fighters of whom all had heard, but on those who, less well known, were yet objects of awe within the profession. Everything to do with these heroes, both in and out of the ring, was of passionate interest to Stan. Joe, arms folded, stayed to listen, and interjected an approving comment or two. Trevannion fidgeted, and tried to get in a word, but there was no stopping Stan. When at last he paused, Trevannion was drinking, and it was Mr. Antrim who stepped in.

'I once had to act for a prize-fighter,' he said. 'It was an interesting case.'

'Who was he?'

'He was a coloured man with the curious name of Funt.'

'Luke Funt. Cruiser-weight. Came from Barbados. Fine fighter. There's a good many reckon he'd have held the title, if he hadn't been barred, by reason he's coloured.'

'Wonderful,' Mr. Antrim exclaimed. 'You are a mine of knowledge, Mr. Gummick.'

'*Funt?*' Trevannion cut across the compliment. 'I thought a funt was a kick delivered with the knee.'

'Luke wouldn't never do nothing like that', Stan protested indignantly. 'E was always a clean fighter, Luke was.'

'You misunderstand me, Stanley. I was not making any reflection on the practice of your coloured friend. I merely——'

'Go on,' Walter prompted Mr. Antrim. 'What was the case?'

'A dispute with a manager. One of a kind which I am assured is all too common in such circles. It arose quite simply. When Funt arrived in this country he was unknown, and he found it very difficult to get engagements. Finally a manager volunteered to look after his affairs, in exchange for a very substantial percentage of his earnings.'

Stan nodded wisely.

'Funt was successful, and popular with audiences—a likeable sort of man too—and soon he was getting good engagements. He attracted the attention of bigger promoters and managers, and finally one of them bought him over

from the first manager. Unfortunately,' Mr. Antrim smiled round upon them, 'the contract Funt had signed with the first manager promised this manager a percentage of his earnings for a period of years. It said nothing about the contract terminating in the event of a transference of interest. And so my client, having won his first fight under the new management, paid his new manager the percentage agreed under the new contract, and was then faced by a demand from his former manager as well.'

'Stan nodded again.

'But surely,' Walter said, 'he could refuse? If he'd been taken over by the new man?'

'Ah!' Mr. Antrim's smile broadened. 'It all turned on the wording of the contract. What, in fact, was the interest which had been transferred? Was Funt—to use a lay analogy—was Funt sold, or only sub-let? Had the new manager acquired the interest held by the old, or had he acquired a part interest, an additional interest? To put it vulgarly, had he, for a consideration, been let in on a good thing? Had he merely bought a share? Manager Number One contended that he had.'

'What did Number Two say?'

'He wasn't interested.'

'How's that?'

'It didn't make any difference to him. His contract gave him so much of the prize money in any case. Whether the boxer had to hand over some more to somebody else didn't concern him. That was my client's concern.'

'Were you able to fix it for him?'

Mr. Antrim smiled like a dissipated seraph.

'It was settled,' he said.

'How?'

'Satisfactorily for my client.'

Walter looked at him, screwing up his eyes in the smoke of his cigarette.

'Legally?' he asked.

Mr. Antrim's smile became positively affectionate.

'Let us say that Manager Number One was persuaded to relinquish any attempt to enforce his claim at law.'

'In other words, you fixed it.'

'The law,' Mr. Antrim said, 'is a game played in accordance to very complicated rules. If you are going to invoke those rules, or to defy them, the first requisite is to know them intimately. Manager Number One was disposed to invoke them——'

'To support him in an illegal claim.'

'Hush, hush!' Mr. Antrim raised a forefinger. 'You must not say illegal. The law cannot be invoked in support of anything that contradicts it. Inequitable, perhaps. But not illegal.'

'Just plain dirty.'

'I prefer inequitable. Harsh, unconscionable. But, really, you know, my client was to blame.'

'In what way?'

'Why, in putting his name to a document without fully understanding its purport.'

'There,' Trevannion broke in. 'I trust, Stanley, that you are taking this to heart. You will remember I cautioned you with reference to any document you might be called upon to sign by Mr. Vupsey.'

'All very well to say that,' Stan answered. 'But these things is take it or leave it. A man in Gus's position got all the cards. I'm nobody. If 'e gives me a chance, it's on 'is terms, see? If I don't like to take it, there's plenty as will.'

'At the same time,' Trevannion assured him, 'a careful scrutiny by an expert——'

'That wouldn't do no good,' Stan said. 'Meanin' no disrespect to you, Mr. Antrim. But you see, it's like this here. Gus, 'e gives me a contrack. I bring it to you. You says it ain't right, I didn't ought to sign it, this or that in it ought to be changed. Very good, I takes it back to Gus, and repeats to 'im what you says. What do you reckon Gus does?'

Redder than ever, his face shining with emotion, he gazed at Mr. Antrim.

'Gus takes the contrack, tears it acrost, and—begging your pardon, Mr. Antrim—'e tells me to go and —— myself.'

'Stanley, Stanley!' Trevannion wagged his head in

reproof. 'I trust you do not use expressions of that nature when you visit 'The Beeches'.'

Stanley's face took on an even deeper colour. He glowered.

'O' course I don't,' he said hotly. 'I didn't ought to of said it any'ow, and I'm sorry, only it's the sort of thing I'd get said to me if I was to act like Mr. Trevannion says I ought.'

Trevannion sighed, and shook his head, whether in disbelief of Stan or in deprecation of the world's wickedness, nobody knew.

'Prize-fighting,' he pronounced, 'is a crooked business.'

'I wouldn't say that, neither,' Stan held out. 'There's a lot o' crooks in it, I grant you. But most fighters is straight.'

'I wonder. We have not all your trusting nature, Stanley.'

Stan glowered again. Before he could find a reply, Trevannion went on:

'Well, we must hope for the best. We must pray that the amiable Mr. Vupsey prove just and upright in his dealings, and that our friend Stanley fare well at his hands.'

'I ain't got no trusting nature about Gus,' Stan said. 'I'm lucky to 'ave 'im notice me, and I got to take what I'm given, that's all.'

His good humour restored, he smiled on them, and then, as if feeling that he had talked too much, took refuge in a long pull at his drink.

Joe, who had been leaning with folded arms against the wall, stood up and nodded several times.

'Ah,' he said, 'it's a queer world. A person would want to take great care, now, before they would put pen to paper.'

Walter turned to look at him.

'No one's caught you, Joe. Don't tell me you've been had.'

'Maybe not.' Joe eyed him meditatively. 'But there's still time. Well. I must get back to my work.'

He went to the door, but, as he reached it, there came a plunging and clattering on the far side. He turned, winked at the others, and opened the door, standing aside to admit the new arrival.

'Gentlemen,' he announced, 'the Mountaineer!'

Mr. Antrim was not one to feel surprise easily, much less to show it; but even he became motionless for two or three seconds on seeing the extraordinary figure that came in.

He saw a man of exceptional height, thin, bony, and angular, clad in an Inverness cape, an immense Norfolk jacket many sizes too large, knickerbockers, and deerstalker hat, all of the same grey-green tweed. The knickerbockers came half-way down his shin, and were separated by a few inches of grey-green stocking from the tops of huge, once black hobnailed boots. To complete his outfit, the figure carried an Alpenstock even longer than himself, striking the end of it on the floor with each of his long, flamboyant strides.

A thin, clean-shaven actor's face smiled bonily, a high beaked nose jutted from under the brim of the hat. Scraggily, oddly handsome, the skin drawn back tightly from a whole series of protrusions, pattern after pattern of wrinkles chasing each other across a face so expressive that in the end it expressed nothing, the newcomer was at first like an animated caricature out of an album; then he rebuked the idea by evincing a crazy dignity.

'Aha, friends,' he cried, in a high, cultured voice: and then, lifting his Alpenstock in greeting, '*A voi tutti salute!*'

They responded, Stan with a mumble, Walter with a nod, Trevannion with a wide gesture.

'What opera's that out of?' Walter asked him.

The long stick was pointed at him in a twirling motion that endangered an empty glass standing on a table. Spryly Joe retrieved it.

'Irrelevant,' cried the apparition. 'Irrelevant, sir. But, for your information'—he leaned forward confidentially—'*Cav-all-eria Rusticana.*'

'I'm delighted to hear it,' Walter replied.

The newcomer pondered this reply. He shot his lips out, and seemed about to speak: then, he shrugged his shoulders, turned away, and eased himself out of his cloak.

Trevannion rose to his feet.

'Let me introduce a new friend,' he said urbanely. 'This is Mr. Antrim, a gentleman learned in the law.'

The tall man turned sharply.

'A lawyer?' he said. 'I dislike lawyers. They are usually in the pay of the municipality.'

Mr. Antrim giggled.

'You may set your mind at rest, sir. That is the very last thing that is likely to happen to me.'

'Why? Are you too big a rascal?'

'Come, come!' Trevannion said pacifically: but Mr. Antrim checked him.

'There are a number of reasons,' he said. 'The chief is that I have no liking for anything official. I like to be independent, to work on my own.'

'In that case,' proclaimed the tall man, 'I will shake your hand. You may belong to a ruffianly tribe, but your behaviour is civil, your sentiments are a credit to you, and, on your assurance—your positive assurance—that you are not, and that you have no intention of being employed by the municipality of this God-accursed town, I will make an exception to my general practice and shake your hand.'

'That's large-minded of you, Mount,' commented Walter. 'That's grand.'

Mr. Antrim stood, allowing his hand to be gravely raised up and down, up and down, as if it were the pump of a church organ. He turned an enquiring eye on Trevannion.

'I did not catch the gentleman's name?'

'His baptismal name he prefers to withhold. It does not enter into the ordinary business of life. His professional name he will prefer to announce to you himself. In our little circle, our sodality, he is known as the Mountaineer.'

Mr. Antrim looked him up and down.

'Very appropriate,' he remarked.

The Mountaineer let go of Mr. Antrim's hand, delved into an inner pocket of his jacket, took out a large wallet, and, with a flourish exactly like that of a conjuror about to produce some unexpected object, drew a large visiting card from the wallet and presented it to Mr. Antrim.

Mr. Antrim received it reverentially.

MR. HORACE WATTEAU

he read,

ILLUSIONIST & ENTERTAINER.

After a suitable pause, he looked up.

'A member of the Profession,' he breathed. 'I am delighted. I am charmed.'

He handed back the card, and once more shook the Mountaineer's hand. The Mountaineer's regal demeanour did not change, but a flush of pleasure stained his thin cheeks.

'Well, sir,' he exclaimed, 'I have your approval, and I am glad. We have in fact exchanged approval, one with another. Or at any rate, tolerance. We are prepared to sit and drink together.'

'Talkin' of which,' put in Joe, who all this time had stood by the open door, observing the proceedings, 'what will I get you?'

'I will take my usual refreshment, Blake. Yes. Decidedly.'

Joe bowed, and backed out. Trevannion sat down again, and rubbed his hands.

'Now, but for friend George, our little circle is complete. I wonder what is keeping him. He is usually here before this.'

Stan raised his head.

'George ain't comin'. 'E's got a night job. Driven to Frillingham. I seen him on the Marine Parade, before I come in.'

'A pity. Never mind. He will be here to-morrow.' He turned to Mr. Antrim. 'A heart of gold, our George. No conversationalist, as critics understand the term. But a heart of gold. An asset to our company.'

Walter looked across at the Mountaineer.

'You never came for your lesson to-day, Mount,' he said reprovingly.

The Mountaineer gave him a startled attention, like a gaunt horse about to shy.

'No more I did. It must have escaped my mind. That is it, Nutchery. It escaped my mind.'

'The Mountaineer,' Trevannion explained, 'has visions of excelling at snooker. Haven't you, Mount?'

The lean head came round. To his surprise, Mr. Antrim found a long bony finger pointing at him, a few inches from his nose.

'The game vulgarly called snooker I find an excellent cathartic.'

Walter laughed. 'Mustn't use words like that, Mount.'

'Do not talk ignorantly, Nutchery. I find it, I repeat—you, sir, I am addressing you—I find it an excellent cathartic. To each of the balls I give the name of a person whom I dislike, or the label of a problem which vexes me. Then—hey presto—I proceed to pot them, one, two, three, out of existence.'

'But you cannot always do it?' Mr. Antrim hazarded.

'In the end, sir. In the end. But I enlist the aid of friend Nutchery here, to expedite the process.'

He drew his head back on his long neck, and surveyed Mr. Antrim.

'Do you approve, lawyer?'

Mr. Antrim smiled and nodded.

'An admirable practice, sir. I wish I had thought of it myself. I congratulate you.'

The Mountaineer's brows rose slowly. For an instant Mr. Antrim felt an inward qualm. The glance that appraised him was not mad: it had a glacial shrewdness, a hard, dark point that seemed to go deep. But his own eyes and smile did not waver.

The Mountaineer relaxed. He leaned farther back, still regarding Mr. Antrim.

'The lawyer improves,' he remarked. 'I believe we may end by liking him.'

Mr. Antrim felt relief. For the moment, he had had a nasty turn. The warmth came back around his heart; he relaxed, and prepared to enjoy his evening.

V

STAN GUMMICK sat in the kitchen of 'The Beeches', his large red hands hanging loose, wrists on knees. Opposite him, Lily glanced up at him with the tender, half-amused solicitude which was the main feeling he aroused in her. She was accustomed, young as she was, to feeling older than people. There was Miss Balgannon, so often needing to be taken care of. Even Mr. Murrough had sometimes looked so much like an angry, puzzled, explosive small boy that Lily would suddenly give a secret maternal chuckle, to the scandal of her normal self. And here was poor Stan, with his puzzled face, his modest decency, looking about six years old. Small wonder she wanted to go over to him, put her arms round him, and say, 'There, there, dear Stan. Never mind.'

Instead, she went on with her mending, then gave him another glance which showed nothing of her feelings.

'You always make the worst of yourself, Stan. To hear you, nobody would think you could do anything at all.'

His eyes came back from vacancy.

'I can't. Not much.'

'Rubbish.' Lily was severe. She bit a thread and attended to her needle. 'You can do a lot of things,' she told him. 'Look at all you did here for Miss Balgannon, in the spring cleaning. Look how you mended the electric fire. Look at —oh, all sorts of things.'

Stan was staring in front of him again.

'Things like that don't signify. Any fool can do odd jobs. It's not bein' able to do what I want: that's what worrits me.'

Lily wrinkled her nose.

'That horrible old fighting,' she said. 'How you can!'

'You didn't ought to think of it that way, Lily.' Stan leaned forward earnestly. 'That's the wrong way to look at it. It's a great sport, is boxing. The finest sport in the world.'

'A lot of nasty great men, thumping each other, giving

each other black eyes, breaking each other's noses! how anyone can call *that* sport!

'They ain't nasty, Lily. You mustn't say a thing like that. If you was to meet them—most of 'em, that is. There is a few, I wouldn't reckon on you meeting them. If you was to meet most of 'em, a finer lot of quiet, well-behaved men you wouldn't meet anywhere. Real gentlemen.'

Lily tossed her head. She was unable to reply at once, as her lips were pressed tight on some pins. By the time they were free Stan had gone on.

'You see—it ain't the getting hurt that matters. It's the sport, the excitement. There's two chaps, strong, well set up, good muscles, 'ealthy clean-livin' chaps as has done all they can to make theirselves fit—goin' in trainin', layin' off the drink, livin' reg'lar an'—an' respectin' theirselves—there they are, stood up there in the ring, to fight fair and let the best man win. Why, there ain't nothin' like it.'

'It's all right for them to get themselves fit and keep off the drink. I don't say a word against that. It's what they do when they are fit. That's what I don't like. You'd think they'd have a better use for all their strength and their muscles that they grow. What's the sense of using your strength to hurt each other and do each other harm?'

Stan shook his head.

'I can't seem to make you see it,' he said sadly. 'Getting hurt don't mean so much to a man.'

'What—not having your nose broken, and your ear all horrid, like that dreadful man I saw you with one day?'

'That? That were Fred Higgins, as good 'earted a chap as ever breathed. One of the very best, is Fred.'

'What about having your ribs broken, and going blind like that poor man they took a subscription for the other day? Don't that mean anything to a man?'

'There's always accidents in every profession,' Stan contended.

'Accidents!'

'Yes. You might all so well say, never go in a motor car, because there's sometimes accidents. Or never go in the

buildin' trade for fear you fall off a scaffoldin', and break your leg, like Perce Truman did.'

This unwonted flight of rhetoric made Lily once more aware of her second self. Outwardly she was a little disconcerted to hear Stan 'answer back', as she put it. Her inner self, on the other hand, noted with approval that he was capable of thinking for himself and standing up for his beliefs. The outer self took prompt charge of the situation.

'You can argue as much as you like,' she told him. 'But you're not going to make me say that I think it's right for great grown men to punch each other about and do things they'd get smacked for if they were little.'

Stan gave a wry smile, and shook his head. There was a silence, disturbed only by the soft, companionable noises of the range. Lily, stitching busily, broke it.

'What is it worries you, then?'

'Worrits me?'

She frowned at her sewing.

'Yes. Didn't you say you wanted—that you weren't satisfied, or something?'

His brows went up in sudden enlightenment.

'Ar. That's it.'

Oh dear, she thought: sometimes I could just *shake* him.

'What's wrong, then, Stan?'

'I'd give anythin' to be a good boxer. Real good. Almost anythin', that is.'

Repressing her desire to say once more that she thought this a very low ambition, she said, 'You mustn't be impatient. Give yourself time.'

Stan shook his head.

'All the time in the world won't do me no good. I got to face it.'

'If you go making up your mind that you're not going to be good, you won't, of course. I call that silly. It's—not very brave, either.'

'I got to look at the facts, Lily. If I was any good—any real good, that is, like I wish I was—I should 'a found it out by now. A good boy shows right away at the start. Even

if he gets beat, you can tell. Now, I'm strong enough. My wind's good, and I got a punch. But I ain't clever. I'm slow, like. I gets foxed, I can't think what to do, and then the other bloke's got me. I got stamina, I can take punishment, the fight's never too long for me. Never long enough.' The wry smile appeared again. 'I'm always waitin' to start something, to work out some good tactic, right up to the last bell. No. I shan't never be no good. Not no real good.'

'That's what you say.' She was fighting the conviction his words forced upon her. 'What do the others say?'

'It's what they don't say.'

Stan was showing an acuteness of perception she had not guessed at. She felt a small, cold, leaden feeling in her stomach.

'Pooh. You're just imagining things.'

'I was sparrin' partner to Archie Winter, last autumn. You know—before his fight with Benny Treece.'

'I don't know anything about it.'

'I told you.' His eyes rested on her without reproach. 'One day I arst him what he thought. What chance I 'ad.' He smiled wistfully. 'E's a decent sort, is Archie. 'E 'ad to stop and think a minute, so as 'e wouldn't 'urt my feelin's, see? "Stan boy," 'e says, and puts 'is arm round my shoulders—always friendly, 'e is, not a bit stuck up, like some of 'em gets when they're in the money—"Stan boy," 'e says, "you're strong, you got a punch, and you got guts," says 'e, "but you wants to vary your boxin' more."'

He stopped, and looked appealingly at Lily.

'Well,' she said. 'I don't know anything about it, of course, and I don't want to: but that sounds very sensible to me. Why does it make you feel down in yourself? It was good advice, wasn't it?'

'Oh, it's good advice all right. If a bloke has the sense to take it.' He stared at her, his brow wrinkled. 'Don't you see what it means?'

'It means what it says, I suppose.'

'It means use your loaf—if you got one. If—see?'

'Use your loaf!'

Lily contrived to express a world of ladylike distaste for an expression she did not understand, and, following her mistress's lead, assumed to be vulgar.

'Use yer 'ead. Think. Plan tactics. Keep your wits about you. Box accordin'.'

'Well? Don't you?'

Stan shook his head.

'T'other chap don't seem to let me. 'E don't give me no time. I thinks out a tactic, but before I can do it, 'e does somethin' else, and I'm too busy tryin' to stop 'im to do mine.'

She put down her sewing on her knee.

'Poor Stan. Don't you *ever* have confidence in yourself?'

'Oh yes. In the gym, when I feel good, and I'm punchin' the bag, I think, cor, I'm strong! an' I punch away, and punch away, and, tell you the truth, I wonder 'ow any man can stand in the ring against me.'

'Good!' she cried. 'I'm glad to hear you talk like that. That's good.'

He shook his head again.

'It ain't so good. When I get in the ring, everything's all different.'

'It shouldn't be, Stan. You shouldn't let it. You should go on thinking how strong you are, and punch away till—'

She broke off, seeing where this was leading her. Another minute, and she would be aiding and abetting him in this disgusting business!

Stan did not notice her hesitation. He grinned his rueful, child's grin.

'Per'aps the other bloke says the same to hisself. Well—one of us got to be wrong, and most times it's me.'

'To hear you talk, anyone'd think you never won.'

'I win sometimes. But I've never beat anyone really good.'

'Well,' she said decisively, putting the sewing into a basket, and getting up, 'it's time I made Miss Balgannon's tea. Shall we have ours then?'

'Whatever you say yourself.' He looked uneasily at the cups and saucers. 'Can I 'elp get ready?'

'You can't indeed.' Then, in case she had added to his

sense of insufficiency, she added quickly, "There's a lot of things you can do, but not at the minute."

Stan cheered up during tea, and consumed with evident relish the hot muffins and the fruit-cake; but after they had finished, and were once more seated on either side of the fire, his gloom returned.

"I can't see no prospecks for myself," he said. "There's my uncle, now. Last 'oliday, I went to see 'im at Newton St. Bastable. Got a big business there, uncle has, well respected. 'E took me to dinner at the restaurant where 'e goes every day. They saves 'im a table. "Step this way, Mr. Gummick", they says. "'Ere you are. Let me take your 'at and coat, Mr. Gummick. 'Ere's your table, Mr. Gummick."

Stan looked sadly into the fire. His round head rolled from side to side.

"Nobody won't say that to me. I shan't be respected like that. Nobody won't ever save tables for me. "Take yer ugly mug out of 'ere, which we don't fancy yer style." That's what they'd say to me, more like.' He sighed. 'No. I don't see no prospecks.'

Lily set herself, for the tenth time, to scold and advise him.

'You must work hard, and get a better job, and give up this horrid fighting,' she began; but it was hard to put conviction into her voice; she was speaking as much for her own benefit as for his. In the depth of her heart, fond as she was of Stan, she saw no prospect either.

2

Miss Balgannon in the meantime continued to be exercised in her mind about Trevannion. The disturbing prospect of his lodging with her she tried to banish by telling herself that she had no such idea, and that she had imagined it all; but memories of his words, his looks, and the deep caressing tones of his voice kept arising to rebut any such facile comfort. The worst of it all was that she did not wholly want the comfort. If anyone had come and told her that she had in fact imagined the whole thing, she would have felt an inward chill of disappointment.

In her perplexity, she turned once again to her friend, Mrs. Bracegirdle, putting the question at first in an abstract, theoretical way. Did her dear friend think that now at last, after this decent lapse of time since the death of Mr. Murrough, she might once more take a lodger?

Mrs. Bracegirdle, with a shrewd look at her, replied in her usual decisive manner. Why not, she demanded? In her view, it would be an excellent step. It would give her dear Ellen something to think about. It would take her out of herself, and stop her from moping.

But when her dear Ellen told her who the prospective lodger was, Mrs. Bracegirdle was less enthusiastic. She knew very little about Trevannion, but what she knew she did not like. A practical woman of forty-five, plump, still attractive, her coarse black hair untouched with grey, she knew her world, and classified its inhabitants under well-defined headings. Very well off by Dycer's Bay standards, she would have been quite wealthy but for her late husband's foible for small and scattered property investments. Not long before his death he had let himself be persuaded into acquiring an interest in several businesses in Dycer's Bay and its vicinity, of which a chain of dairies was by far the most important. To realise on some of these, and to safeguard her title to others, was proving a slow and troublesome business for the widow. Irritated at the tardy methods of the local solicitor, she had come down to stir him up, taken an idolent fancy to the place, and stayed. Normally, as a woman who liked smart and comfortable surroundings and could afford them, she would have laughed at the fusty amenities of Dycer's Bay. But she was tired, physically and mentally, after the major business that ensued on her husband's death, and it amused her to dawdle over this minor part of it. It amused her, too, to find herself a power, in virtue of her interest in local businesses and properties. Besides, as she very sensibly remarked to Miss Balgannon, she didn't know yet how she would be placed financially, so it was as well to economise for a bit. So she remained, comfortable, assured, laughing at Dycer's Bay and all its works, and commanding its scandalised admiration of her

modish clothes, her outspoken comments; together with such speculation about her past as it indulged in for its own defence.

With such a background, and such decided views, it was natural that Mrs. Bracegirdle should look askance upon many of the institutions and inhabitants of Dycer's Bay. Anything which she could not at once set down in her regular categories was to her suspect if not condemned. She had the prosperous person's instinctive nose for success, and for all varieties of failure. Never having experienced any difficulty in adjusting herself to the world about her, she was a materialist: and her goodness of heart confirmed her in her materialism.

Trevannion incurred her suspicions on more than one count. The least touch of shabbiness or seediness repelled her at once; it spelt failure. The grandeur of his manner and his educated voice were an affront to her, since they did not go with his clothes, his habits, or what little she could learn of his employment. More precisely, although without exact evidence, she associated him with some of her husband's less fortunate local investments. Mr. Bracegirdle had been seen dining with Trevannion, and she felt sure Trevannion had a part in misleading him. Over and above all this, her downright nature disliked anything devious and incalculable. Why should anyone who showed every sign of knowing better be content to stop in a one-horse town like Dycer's Bay? By the widow's reckoning, there could be only one reason. He was up to no good. Or, perhaps, he had been up to no good, and so in just punishment his operations were relegated to this mean theatre. In any case, save under such derogatory title as rogue or crook, he was unclassifiable: and to be unclassifiable was with Mrs. Bracegirdle to be an outcast.

So, when her dear Ellen shyly and timidly intimated the name she had in mind, Mrs. Bracegirdle sat forward in her chair, and her face assumed a thoughtful expression. She did not at once go back on her previous advice. She did not at once say anything at all.

This check had the effect of making Miss Balgannon

repeat, in an even more hesitating way, what she proposed doing: attempt a faltering sentence or two in support: then peter out into silence.

'Mr. Trevannion,' Mrs. Bracegirdle said at last. 'H'm. Well, I don't deny, my dear Ellen, that puts rather a different complexion on the matter.'

At that Miss Balgannon surprised her.

'Does it, May dear? I don't quite see why?'

Mrs. Bracegirdle blinked, mentally at any rate, so unlike her friend was it to question anything she said. But her mind moved quickly from this to the more important point that she had nothing definite to reply. To tell Ellen that Trevannion could be no good because he was shabby and lived in Dycer's Bay would be neither tactful nor persuasive.

On the other hand, to suggest that, once he got into the house, he might acquire an ascendancy over its owner would be equally inadvisable. Mrs. Bracegirdle knew enough about her own sex to realise that she must go very carefully indeed if her remarks were not to have the opposite effect from what she wished. She could hardly raise the issue of propriety. True, Trevannion was younger than Mr. Murrough, but even in Dycer's Bay it could hardly excite adverse comment for a man in the neighbourhood of sixty to lodge with a spinster of well over forty, who had also a maid as chaperon.

Accordingly Mrs. Bracegirdle took refuge in hints and silences, hesitations, shrugs of her plump shoulders, and anxious frowns which she affected to dispel in the effort to agree with her friend.

'Of course, dear Ellen,' she said. 'You know your own business best. We will only hope that everything turns out well.'

The effect of this was, as she intended, to alarm Miss Balgannon and plunge her once more into a ferment of private agitation. But it had another effect, an effect which nobody who knew Miss Balgannon would have expected. It endeared to her the source of all the trouble. Scared of Trevannion as she was, and perturbed at the thought of having

the routine of life at 'The Beeches' broken into, she was involuntarily drawn towards him by the idea of opposition from any other source, even from Mrs. Bracegirdle. She dimly perceived this herself, and wondered at it, and felt guilty and ungrateful. To consult dear May, and then feel in the opposite direction . . . it couldn't be accounted for, it was wrong, it was silly, but she couldn't help it, so there, and anyway it was a shame the way people didn't seem to appreciate poor dear Mr. Trevannion—

"At the admission implied by that adjective, Miss Balgannon blushed so deeply that Mrs. Bracegirdle broke off what she was saying, and began to talk about something quite different.

3

'Trev, old boy.'
'Teddie?'

Trevannion and Mr. Antrim sat together in Trevannion's room. The hour was late. Despite the time of year, the evening had turned chilly, and a fire flickered briskly in the narrow grate. The two men had pulled their chairs close to it. A bottle of whisky on the small table between them, and a kettle in the fire-place, attested the convivial spirit of the hour.

For some time neither had spoken. Hot whisky and dancing fire-light were aids to meditation, and each man, having all but lost his fear of the other, felt relaxed, and as nearly easy as was possible in the circumstances.

'Trev.' Mr. Antrim turned his head sideways to look at his companion. 'Sh'll I tell you what puzzles me?'

'Do, Teddie. Do.'

'All this.' Mr. Antrim waved his glass. 'I can't quite place you here.'

'Meaning exactly, Ted old boy?'

'Well—a man of your parts—I don't want to flatter you, old boy, but a man of your abilities: I can't understand how you're content with this set-up.'

'If you refer to this habitation, Ted old boy, I'm not. Far from it. I have plans for moving. Active plans. Very soon.'

'Glad to hear it, Trev. Allow me to congratulate you.'

Transferring his glass carefully to his left hand, he reached across, and shook Trevannion's hand.

'Thank you, Teddie. Thank you. Much appreciated.'

Mr. Antrim regained his former posture.

'Matter of fact, old boy, I didn't only mean your digs. I meant the whole caboosh. That crowd at 'The Peace'. Dycer's Bay. Everything. Shouldn't have thought it gave scope for a man of your talent. Shouldn't have thought you'd be content.'

Trevannion took some time to reply, so long that Mr. Antrim peered at him apprehensively. Then he took the poker, and prodded the coals.

'I like it, you know,' he said, in a thoughtful tone. 'It suits me.'

'Yes, I know. But not to put too fine a point on it, old boy, you could do a damn sight better for yourself in a bigger place. You could make much more money.'

'Money isn't everything.'

'No,' Mr. Antrim admitted, opening his eyes wide at the stimulated coals. 'But it's a hell of a lot. I mean—I hope, old boy, I'm not offending you by speaking frankly? I wouldn't do that for the world.'

'Not in the least, Teddie. Not in the least. On the contrary, I'm grateful for your interest.'

'Then, speaking with perfect frankness, old boy, what are you doing in this dump? You're built on the grand scale. You like comfort, good cigars, good clothes. With your ability, you could live in luxury. What are you doing here?'

Once again, Trevannion did not answer at once.

'Come to that,' he said, 'what are *you* doing here?'

'That's another matter,' Mr. Antrim said softly. 'A man may be unfortunate.'

'Exactly.'

'Misfortune is not always deserved.'

'True.'

'Men of the world, like you and me, don't need to go into lengthy explanations. We accept.'

'We do, Teddie old boy. We do.'

'Sometimes—' Mr. Antrim gave his sudden unexpected giggle—'sometimes we damn well have to. But—' he recovered himself—'my case is different from yours. I was never on the grand scale. Never aspired to it.'

'What makes you think I do?'

Trevannion's tone never varied from its apparent sleepy amicability, but a close observer might have felt that he was alert under the surface, like a large cat.

'Several things, Trev. Several things. The cut of you. The extent of your knowledge, your reading. You're educated above this.'

'You must know, as well as I do, Teddie, with your wide experience of life, that the economic test isn't the only one.'

'You said that just now—if you'll excuse my pointing it out. We're talking in a bloody circle.'

Trevannion smiled pacifically.

'I made the same answer to the same remark.'

'Sorry to be pert—pertinacious, old boy. But—you were good enough to allude to my experience of life. Well, I have had a good deal of experience: and I don't like to see a good man waste himself. Pass up his opportunities. I repeat, frankly, Trev, you are built on the grand scale. For big operations.'

Trevannion once more gave the coals a stir.

'Operations,' he said dreamily. 'Grand scale. I take you to mean, why am I not a crook in a big way?'

Mr. Antrim giggled.

'Crook!' he said. 'Come now; crook! I never said crook.'

'Let me say it for you, then.'

Trevannion made the flame leap up, flinging his enormous shadow back at the wall. In the blaze, his moustache shone golden.

'Of course I'm a crook,' he went on. 'So are you. That's why you're here. That's partly why I'm here. Partly: not altogether. Strange though it must seem to you, I was telling the truth when I said I liked it here.'

'Crook,' whispered Mr. Antrim, 'is a strong word. An unpleasant word.'

'Don't let's be afraid of it, Teddie. Every man who lives

by his wits is a crook, in greater or less degree. If he's honest with himself, he knows it. My operations, as you call them, are all within the law. That doesn't make me any less a crook. If I "operated" on the grand scale you talk about, it would be far more difficult. I prefer to work here, as I do, with my eyes wide open, and remain in control of my own life.'

He twisted in his chair, and regarded Mr. Antrim, who during this speech had sat, the tips of his fingers together, looking into the flames.

'Working on a small scale—forgive me, Teddie. Your glass is empty. Let me replenish it. I insist; I positively insist. Working on a small scale is safer, pleasanter, more amusing. Suppose, for example, you complete a transaction which is not entirely to the satisfaction of the other party. If—have I said anything to amuse you?'

'I was admiring your choice of words, old boy. That's all.'

'Sorry. I'll translate.'

'Oh, I understand. I understand.'

'Well, to put it crudely—if you sell someone a pup for eighteen pence, he may express resentment, probably will, in fact, but he is less likely to take active steps than if the sum involved were very much larger. You concede that?'

'True. Very true.'

'Persons who find themselves aggrieved are not in the habit of consulting you unless the amount they hope to receive is worth the trouble and expense of receiving it. Agreed?'

'Absolutely, old boy. Absolutely.'

'Very well. Multiply one such petty transaction by fifty, by a hundred, by several hundred, and you achieve the same financial result as from a large-scale operation, without the risk of active steps being taken in return—which, even if they don't succeed, have yet to be combated.'

'An excellent principle,' Mr. Antrim approved, slowly nodding his head. 'The only drawback is that it involves a great deal of work. A hundred—a thousand—small operations instead of one big one.'

boy, since otherwise they would be unable to function: to put it concisely, they would go bust?’

‘I grant you,’ Trevannion said largely, waving his hand. ‘Go on.’

‘The law of averages appeared to swing over sharply, ve-ry sharply, in favour of the policy holders. In the technical sense, I mean.’ He tittered. ‘Because I suppose that, strictly speaking, you can’t call it in a person’s favour if he dies.’

• Trevannion grinned.

‘Did they notice anything else?’

‘They noticed that in each case you were the agent concerned.’

‘That need hardly have surprised them, as I am their official agent for the district. Was that all?’

‘We-el, they——’

‘They didn’t notice the addresses of the deceased policy holders?’

Mr. Antrim sat up, startled.

‘No,’ he said. ‘At least, if they did, that point was not mentioned in my instructions.’

‘That’s all right, then,’ Trevannion said comfortably.

‘Why? Tell me, Trev. How do the addresses come in?’

Trevannion looked at him.

‘You may have heard that this district is subject to occasional epidemics of gastro-enteritis, or some such acute disorder?’

‘I have heard rumours. But I did not feel any personal cause for alarm.’

‘The disorder is thought to be in some way connected with the water supply.’

‘I trust the authorities do all in their power to protect us, Trev, old boy.’

Trevannion brushed this aside.

‘I have noticed that certain parts of the town, certain terraces, appear for some reason to be more liable to attack than others. Possibly owing to ancient and defective piping, sanitation, or what not. At any rate, the proportion of residents affected struck me as higher than that obtaining

elsewhere.' Trevannion's smile broadened to a beam of pure pleasure. 'I acted accordingly. I backed my belief. I started an especially assiduous campaign with regard to these favoured localities. And I reaped the reward.'

'You reaped the reward?'

'Naturally, Teddie. Naturally. The labourer is worthy of his hire. You wouldn't expect me to act in wholly disinterested benevolence towards the Company, would you?'

'Towards your employers? No, Trev, old boy. Frankly, I wouldn't.' He sniggered. 'You've touched on a point I was going to bring up just now. A rumour had come to the ears of the Company, just a rumour, you know—that in one or two cases you yourself had been paying the premiums.'

Trevannion grinned.

'Tck, tck! Vexing when one's little private benevolences come to light.'

'It was only a rumour, Trev, old boy.'

'Well, Teddie; I can't deny it. There's no need to look at me like that.' He grinned again. 'You wouldn't refuse me my little charitable impulses, would you?'

'On no account, Trev. On no account. They are to your credit, I am sure'—he giggled again—'in more senses than one. How exactly did you work it?'

'Work it, Teddie?'

'Yes, Trev. How did you work it?'

'The principle on which my benevolence operated, Teddie, was very simple. Certain persons, who in my public spirited fashion I felt should enjoy the benefits of insurance, were unable to afford the premium. I sympathised, Teddie. I felt deeply for their plight; and, in my humble way, I wished to assist them. But, though poor, they were often proud. They would not accept charity. Now I, in my capacity as the Company's agent, met more than my share of such deserving cases; far more than I could afford to relieve, even had they been willing. But, as you have doubtless observed, Teddie, those who will not accept charity will often fall in readily with a business arrangement, or something that looks like one, and especially if it has some element of a sporting risk, or gamble.'

'I begin to see, Trev. I begin to follow you.'

'So, on a number of occasions, I was permitted to pay the premiums, on the understanding that, when the sum assured fell due, I should receive a proportion of it.'

'What proportion—if it isn't asking too much of you?'

'Fifty per cent. It was a sporting gamble. If the insured person dies soon, then admittedly, I get a good return for my money. If he defies the fell sergeant, and remains alive, then I must fall back on the knowledge of a good deed well done.'

'And accept a lower rate of interest.'

'If you like to put it that way.' Trevannion eyed him benignly. 'Well, Teddie old boy: will you have anything to report back to the Company on that?'

Mr. Antrim looked back at him through half-closed lids.

'They wouldn't like it, Trev. They wouldn't like it at all. It's a risky game. If you are concerned to remain their agent, that is.'

'I am hoping soon to be independent of them. But that is by the way. My point is, there is nothing illegal about my charitable enterprises.'

'You have given yourself a direct pecuniary interest in a number of deaths which have in fact taken place.'

'From natural causes, Teddie. As certified by impeccable medical authority.'

'Do you allude to old Hopkins?'

'We need not be personal, Teddie. We need not be personal.'

'What about the Health Officer? Has his curiosity not been aroused?'

'Hitherto, things have been all right. Much of the town, including these terraces, is owned by members of the Council.'

'That is fortunate.'

'A fresh medical officer, four or five years ago, became interested. He was moved on.'

'How very satisfactory.'

'As a matter of fact, there is another man, now, a new

man, very energetic and officious. I think something will have to be done. But never mind that. The point is, the Company has nothing on me to date.'

'And yet—' Mr. Antrim began, and stopped.

'Yet they are sufficiently disturbed to engage you to look into the matter? I know. Three or four years ago, that would have been serious. To-day it isn't. If it had been, I might not have told you.'

'I should have found out,' Mr. Antrim whispered.

'Possibly, Teddie. Possibly not.'

'It would only have been a matter of time.'

Trevannion nodded. 'And unrestricted opportunity to make inquiries.'

Mr. Antrim smiled at the fire.

'I am not easily intimidated,' he said, in a meditative tone.

'I should hate to be obliged to try, Teddie old boy.'

'You won't be. I'm not going to work against you.'

'I felt sure of it, Teddie. I felt sure of it.'

There was silence. Two active minds considered a truce which allayed immediate fears but put no stop to vigilance. Trevannion got up, and reached for the kettle to refill the glasses, stretching his trousers tight over a broad behind. Mr. Antrim felt an impulse to stick a pin in it, and upset his host's grave composure.

'Tell me, Trev, old boy,' he said presently, when the glasses were filled, and the pair had toasted each other anew. 'You said you were moving soon. Or do I take you up wrongly?'

'No, Teddie, you do not. I hope to move very soon.'

And he told Mr. Antrim of his design to become a lodger, and more than a lodger, at 'The Beeches'.

'What age is this Miss Balgannon?' Mr. Antrim wanted to know.

'Forty-two or -three. Dresses older, but looks younger. Good skin. Nice little figure. Affectionate nature.'

'Well-to-do, no doubt?'

'No. She is not well off. She owns the house, but has very little besides.'

'The attraction, then, Trev old boy?'

'I have told you, she is quite personable. Or could be, if induced to dress in a more contemporary manner.'

'But'—Mr. Antrim waved a pale finger to and fro—'if you'll excuse me saying so, old boy, although of mature years you are a fine figure of a man. In fact, you are just at the period when you can best attract a young and romantic girl. Your features, your moustache. Your bearing and your power to charm: these would make you irresistible if you chose. You could secure someone much younger, more attractive, and wealthier.'

'And lay up trouble for myself in a very few years' time? Expose myself to the whims and crudities of a young girl? No, no, Teddie. I've had enough of young girls. If I tie myself up with a woman again, it will be with one who can be easily led and who will be grateful to me for taking notice of her.'

'They often begin that way,' Mr. Antrim said, 'and turn out very different once they've got you. It's a mistake to think that a plain woman whom nobody has tried will prove grateful and easy to deal with. On the contrary, she's often damned exacting. Damned hard to please.'

'That fact has not escaped my notice, Teddie. I am, if you will forgive me saying so, not wholly unacquainted with the ways of women.'

'I never supposed that you were, Trev, old boy. But what you said prompted me to make an observation based on an extensive experience of matrimonial cases that had—so to speak—gone down the drain. It has often been one of the saddest of eye-openers to me that plain women are not sufficiently grateful to the man who rescues them from neglect.'

'In this case there is no risk at all. The lady is of a timid and affectionate type. She was devoted to her father who is dead. I shall be her father and mother and child. The only thing she would not forgive is to be deceived. At my age, I shall have little temptation to deceive her.'

'Such confidence, Trev! I admire it. It must be wonderful to be so sure of oneself.'

'You are just as confident.'

'In what respect, Trev, old boy?'

'You are confident that none of your former clients will—how shall I put it?—resent forcibly your obstinate recollection of their affairs. Do you in.'

'Yes. In a way, perhaps, that is true. Yes. Well. We must all have some degree of confidence in ourselves, or what would become of us?'

Trevannion held up his glass, and, closing one eye, looked through it at the light.

'What indeed, Teddie, old boy? What indeed?'

VI

THE FIRST of Stan's three fights, against Sid Prodger, took place at the Corn Exchange, Dycer's Bay. In a programme of seven bouts, it was put third, more from its local interest than because of the status of the principals. Sid Prodger, unknown in Dycer's Bay, was advertised as the conqueror of three individuals, equally unknown: Stan, being the conqueror of no one in particular, was described as 'that up-and-coming welter, whose grit should earn him premier honours'.

The rumour that Prodger intended to sell the fight had got round, and a number of those near the ringside attended with more than usual interest to see what would happen. Stan appeared nervous; there were pale patches on either side of his nose; during the preliminaries he looked miserably in front of him, and, while the referee was exhorting the pair, he looked miserably at the ground. Sid Prodger, whose appearance combined the less attractive features of a ferret and a fish, seemed also to be ill at ease, a circumstance at once noticed by the watchers.

As soon as the bell went, Stan surprised everyone by making a determined rush at his opponent and attacking him strongly in the body. Sid, disliking this, held on, and was promptly ordered to let go. Immediately after the break, Stan rushed in again, receiving a crisp left on his already flat nose as he came. At this his face resumed its normal colour, growing gradually pinker with each minute.

As the round progressed, Sid Prodger's conduct began to puzzle those who were so carefully watching him. Far from wishing to lie down, he appeared self-sacrificingly anxious to win on a foul. Realising that Stan's one idea was to attack his body, he did his best to contrive that he should be hit below the belt. Half a head the taller, he jumped as Stan came in, and was severely reprovved by the referee. Replying with an injured whimper, he next tried to work round to the referee's blind side and knock Stan's blows

downwards, so that they should land on the forbidden area; but the bell went before he could succeed.

In the second round Sid managed to get the referee unsighted, and, evidently judging he had been hit near enough to his belt to have a try, collapsed writhing and claspings his stomach with every symptom of anguish. His seconds immediately set up an outcry, and that section of the audience which always join in on any accusation of foul play gave tongue with them.

'La-ow!' they bellowed. 'Booo! Booo! Laa-ow!'

The referee took no notice, but proceeded to count the seconds, with inexorable clarity. Stan's face was a mask of horror and anxiety. To win like this, on the suspicion of a low punch, would be dreadful. But at 'seven' Sid, realising that he would be counted out, got up, and with an unnatural power of recuperation rushed at Stan and attacked viciously.

A flurry of punches followed, each man slamming away for all he was worth, till, in response to angry cries from his corner, Stan stood off.

'Box 'im!' entreated Ted, his trainer. 'Keep away, and box 'im!'

And Stan, who had a useful straight left when he remembered, stuck it out and kept off the vengeful Sid till the end of the round.

Ted had several things to say during the minute's rest, but Stan, generally so docile, sat with a mulish look on his crimson face. Rumour had wrought him to a state which could be worked off only in violent action. Sid was strong, quite as strong as he was, and he had caught Stan some vicious clips in the exchange that followed his rise from the floor. But he relied on hooks and swings, against which a straight left—and Stan had a long reach—was the best defence: the elementary principle that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line holding good in boxing as in other branches of applied mathematics.

So Stan listened to the words of wisdom, but for once they did not stick in his mind. What was all this about a crooked fight! Stan hated anything crooked. It embarrassed

him, it bewildered him, he didn't know how to take it or what to do about it. The whole thing engendered in him such an angry agitation that he longed to fling himself at the supposed cause of it and punch him to a pulp.

Still, obedience to good counsel was a habit, and he opened the third round more cautiously. Sid, waiting the expected attack, gave him a few seconds, and, when it did not come, started an attack of his own. An ugly right swing came whizzing towards Stan's jaw. He saw it, just in time, ducked, and took it on his swollen left ear. It hurt exquisitely.

Stan saw red. All Ted's counsel blew up like a bubble. He rushed savagely in, driving away at the body with both hands, his full strength and weight behind each blow. A right, starting from six inches away and travelling upwards, caught Sid in the gap between the parting of the ribs and the top of his belt. He went down, squirming in earnest.

The house yelled. This time there was no question of his getting up at seven—or at seventeen, if the count had gone on so long. At ten the referee cried 'Out!' and pointed to Stan, who stood dazed, as if he did not realise what was happening. Then, as in a tumult of noise, most of it applause, Sid's seconds jumped into the ring and picked up their fallen man, a great beam of joy came over his face. He placed his gloves together, held them aloft and shook them, and Ted, grinning and vociferating, beckoned him and put his old shabby dressing-gown about his shoulders. Then Stan, his expression changing to one of concern, went over to his adversary's corner, to see how he did and to condole with him.

The seconds made way for him grudgingly, muttering the word 'low', but Sid, now more or less recovered, smiled weakly and uttered some inaudible word of good will.

Stan jumped down, and made his way back to the dressing-room, positively incandescent with happiness. All anger, all fear, all suspicion of Sid were forgotten. Battle and victory had purified his soul.

Sid had not taken a dive. Sid had been fairly beaten,

Stan had won by a clean knock-out, and, as he happily told Lily afterwards, nobody couldn't say no other.

What had in fact been planned, and what would have happened if Stan had not taken charge of matters so decisively, formed a subject of much debate in local circles. Those who clung to the original theory, that Sid had been paid to throw the fight, were obliged to fall back on a new one, that someone had paid him even more for a double-cross. Thus their pet belief in the crookedness of boxing was saved. In any case, they agreed that Gus was not a good man to double-cross, and the consensus of opinion was that, whatever had gone on behind the scenes, Sid Prodger hadn't done hisself no sort of good.

2

Stan's second match, against Sailor Berridge, took place at Frillingham, before a much larger audience. A small contingent followed him from Dycer's Bay, including Trevannion and Mr. Antrim. Neither had intended to go, but Joe Blake, landlord of 'The Peace', had been given a block of tickets to sell, and Walter Nutchery had produced several of them one evening before the fight, and offered them to the faithful: and, Stan being present, they could hardly do other than take a couple.

Walter sat with them. Trevannion was in expansive form. Surprised by Stan's first victory, he now expressed a guarded optimism. Walter felt nervous for Stan, but not about the result. Privately convinced that the first fight was crooked, he thought that, since Stan had won in such clean fashion, the astute Gus would see to it that such good work was not thrown away, as it would be if the Sailor won. At the same time, the Sailor, to judge by the posters, had beaten some good men in his time, and moved in a far higher class than Stan.

Stan, that encyclopaedia on boxing matters, spoke with respect of the Sailor's record, but pointed out that the victories referred to were won a good while ago, and that recently little had been heard about the Sailor. Trevannion at that point suggested that the Sailor's ship might have

been for a long time in foreign waters. Stan nodded thoughtfully; but Walter felt sure the Sailor had come down in the world, and maybe reached that stage when a little extra money for losing a fight was all in the day's work.

The Sailor proved to be a lean, saturnine, smiling individual with an attractive monkey face, a blue shave, and an astonishing variety of designs tattooed upon his arms and torso. He looked fit, wiry, and wholly free from any kind of apprehension. He smiled at Stan, smiled all through the preliminaries, shuffled his feet, did a little dance in the resin, and shadow boxed in his corner until the bell summoned him out.

In action he was at once revealed as fast and clever. Taking Stan out of his stride, he landed a series of quick lefts, then smothered him up and clipped him about the head with right hooks. Smiling, he obeyed the referee's order to break, and proceeded to dance round the bewildered Stan, shifting from one foot to the other, varying his attack every three or four seconds.

Stan essayed a rush. The Sailor clinched, and held on till the referee tapped his pictorial shoulder. Stan rushed again. This time the agile Sailor retreated. Stan, plunging after him, drove him almost to the ropes. Seeing his chance, he sprang at him, but the Sailor was away, with an eel-like twist, and Stan cannoned into the ropes and had to clutch at the top one to save himself.

A laugh went up, and the Sailor, now feeling perfectly at home, began to clown. In skill and ring-craft he was miles ahead of Stan, and when the round ended the applause was all for him.

In the second round, the Sailor had things all his own way. He slipped, he ducked, he grimaced, he danced, he made Stan look awkward and clumsy as a bear. He seemed to have no difficulty in avoiding Stan's blows: half the time he was not there for Stan to hit at.

One thing, however, Stan's seconds had noticed, and Stan, to whom it had been pointed out in the minute's rest, perceived it now for himself. Clever though the Sailor was, and often though he landed, his blows were mere taps. They

did not hurt. So Stan, angry and humiliated by the antics and the crowd's enjoyment of them, doggedly kept on trying. The fight was for eight rounds. He had plenty of time.

In the third round, success went to the Sailor's head. The applause and Stan's slowness encouraged him to clown more and more. He made faces, he winked at the crowd, he blew kisses in a clinch, he swung his right behind his own shoulder and flipped Stan backhanded in the face on the far side. But not a single blow hurt: and Stan, wise now to the situation, was watching the Sailor with a new concentration. Ted had given him a piece of sound advice: he was looking for the chance to take it.

Early in the fourth round the chance came. Stan opened with three rushes, each exactly like the others, as if his one idea was to land on the body. The Sailor smothered two of these without trouble, and scored with a quick and showy counter on the third. Stan drew back, and made as if to rush in again. The Sailor dropped his guard, and waited, smiling, offering his jaw, confident that he could avoid the blow. Stan stepped forward, and made as if to respond to the challenge with a furious left swing.

What he hoped for happened. The Sailor ducked and darted towards him, so as to come up under the swing, land on the body, and clinch. Shifting his feet, Stan put everything he had behind a right that started towards the body but came upwards.

It was a blow of good intentions rather than precise aim, and it got a better reward than it deserved. The light-hearted Sailor ran right into it. As his head came up from ducking under the expected swing, Stan's right glove, with all his strength and outraged resentment of the Sailor's play-acting, landed full on the sharp blue-shaven chin, and the Sailor fell flat on his face.

It was all so quick that the audience was aghast. Nineteenths of them did not see the blow at all. In complete silence the referee counted the seconds over the fallen Sailor. The count was a formality. The only sign of life in the prone figure was a small convulsive twitching of his left

leg: and his seconds, without waiting for the count to finish, climbed into the ring to pick him up.

Then there was confusion indeed. Applause for Stan was mingled with resentment at not having seen exactly what happened. That the Sailor was fairly and squarely out not even the apostles of corruption could gainsay. He had to be carried to his corner, where a couple of minutes of throwing water and affectionate slapping of his face were needed to rouse him to a sense of the outer world. When he did open his eyes, he was at once in character.

'Cool!' he said. 'What 'it me?'

And he shook Stan's hand, grinning with a good will equal to that now beaming in the honest visage of his conqueror. A few seconds later, he was on his feet, acknowledging with clasped hands the greetings of the audience, putting an arm round Stan's shoulders, ruffling Stan's hair, and making an exit as happy and triumphant as if he had won.

3

The effect of this second victory was to send Stan's stock high. Gus Vupsey, judging his moment, announced to the local journals that, so impressed was he with the display of the up-and-coming welter from Dycer's Bay, he intended to match him with none other than young Woodlock. While he did not go so far as to predict a victory for the local boy, he was confident that the illustrious Mancunian, who had stopped—and there followed a long list of notables—and who was now matched with Sim Hancock of Plymouth in the final eliminator for the welter-weight crown, would not have matters his own way. Stan's quick victories, and especially the suddenness of the second, were exploited and made the basis of suggestions that an unspectacular demeanour in the ring was the result of deep and cunning policy, and that he possessed a secret punch. Testimony from the Sailor, that it was as if a mule had kicked him in the kisser, supported these fantasies: and, final and strongest evidence of interest, local bookmakers reported that, albeit cautiously and in small quantities, money was being laid on Stan to win.

As a result, Stan found himself a personality in his own town. Small boys stopped him on his round and begged his autograph. Strangers accosted him and wished to stand him drinks. His opinion was sought on matters connected with boxing, where it was valuable, and other sports, where it was not. There was an interview with him in the *Dycer's Bay Morning Chronicle*, supported with a photograph which made him look as if he were about to burst into tears.

And, to top his happiness, the new van was delivered, and he exchanged his bicycle for the glory of the driver's seat. This he felt to be a real step up in the world. In fact, it looked as if, in his own small way, he might emulate his uncle, and become an object of respect.

All his world praised him. Trevannion was gracious, with a surprised warmth Stan had never felt from him. He did not even hint at possibilities of defeat ahead. Mr. Antrim felicitated him, and offered legal advice free of charge in the matter of future contracts. The Mountaineer, who took no stock of such worldly pastimes as boxing, was brought to understand that Stan had distinguished himself, and at his next visit to 'The Peace' produced a silver sugar-spoon from some recess in his clothing, and presented it, adorning the occasion with a speech in which references to Herodotus, Edward the Sixth, Spinoza, and municipal depravity came all alike to the perturbed recipient. Joe Blake, the landlord, provided the most knowledgeable appreciation, and Walter the kindest.

The one person who did not seem to be impressed was Lily. If Stan must fight, she liked him to win. But she continued to be adamant in her dislike of the whole business, and poor Stan, though he allowed ruefully for her point of view, felt more scolded than congratulated for having added two quick knock-out wins to his brief record.

4

Trevannion's next call on Miss Balgannon was paid in the afternoon. It followed an exchange of letters. One, from him, couched in Johnsonian language, asked when he might have the pleasure of once more paying his respects,

and signed most sincerely hers, George Trevannion, with a tremendous flourish on each capital and a great stroke running backwards from the final -n, underneath the entire signature, which, thus underlined, took on all the emphasis of a statement: and a reply, in a hand firmer and less fluttering than might have been expected, expressed pleasure in the prospect and invited him to take afternoon tea with her on the following Thursday.

At a quarter to four, therefore, in his best array, Trevannion once again bore down upon the gate of 'The Beeches', and Lily let him in.

He smiled upon her, with the relaxed goodwill of a man on a happy occasion; asked her how she was; and commented upon the attractiveness of her cap and apron. These were new, purchased by Miss Balgannon only two days before, and put on for the first time in honour of the occasion.

Lily flushed with pleasure. She received his hat and his Malacca cane, and bestowed them safely, taking a little longer than was necessary in order to hide the smiles that came dancing across her face.

Trevannion rubbed his hands and beamed on her. He was pleased with his own observation, and with the flutter of delight into which it had thrown her. A nice child, he thought. An appreciative child. Not like so many nowadays. And, as always, the revelation of his power to charm increased his liking for her.

'This way, please, sir.'

He knew the way well enough; it was only three steps anyhow; but good-humouredly he let her precede him and open the door.

'Mr. Trevannion, ma'am.'

Giving her another smile, intimate, warm, and personal, Trevannion went in—and the smile which he had been ready to transfer to Miss Balgannon dropped from his face.

Seated on the far side of the fire-place, four-square, solid, with stocky legs wide apart and hands on knees, sat an elderly man in seafaring uniform. He had a broad, square

face, its squareness accentuated by a square-cut, grizzled beard with a clean-shaven upper lip: and his peaked navy-blue cap was lying upside down on the floor beside his chair.

All this Trevannion saw while his eyes were seeking Miss Balgannon; and, characteristically, it was the last detail which outraged him most. Had the interloper left his cap in the hall, it would have given him warning, he would have asked Lily who owned it, and have been saved this shock. A shock affected Trevannion as an exposure. No matter whether he had given himself away or not, he was filled with anger always against the person responsible.

Recovering himself quickly, he strode across to Miss Balgannon and bent low over her hand.

'My dear Miss Balgannon. What a delightful occasion.'

He allowed his voice to trail off a little on the final syllables, and his eyes to leave his hostess and fall in polite inquiry on the stranger.

Miss Balgannon fluttered into speech.

'Mr. Trevannion . . . allow me to introduce . . . Captain Higson . . . a very old friend of my father . . . Captain Higson . . . Mr. Trevannion.'

Trevannion was all smiles and sweeping courtesy.

'How do you do, Captain. Delighted to make your acquaintance. Pray do not rise.'

With a swift and obvious glance at the ample stomach which forced the stout thighs apart, Trevannion succeeded in showing kindly consideration for an older man, and at once felt better.

Captain Higson, who had shown no intention of rising, held out a hand.

'Do?' he said: and continued to regard Trevannion with an ox-like, unwinking stare that expressed nothing at all.

Miss Balgannon repeated that the Captain was a very old friend, a very old friend indeed. As soon as she ceased, the Captain removed his gaze from Trevannion, and directed it out of the window, for all the world, Trevannion thought, as if it were a searchlight.

'Thirty-seven year,' he corroborated, in a wooden bass.

'Yes. Thirty-seven year come next October, since I ran into Ned Balgannon.'

'Captain Higson has known me since I was a tiny girl. Haven't you, Captain?'

Evidently the Captain was statistically minded. Accuracy came before gallantry.

'We-el,' he said; and, after consideration, held his hand at a height from the floor which implied that Miss Balgannon had begun to shoot up, as the saying was. In fact, he had to hoist himself a little in his chair before he was satisfied that the demonstration was correct.

'About that height, you were, Ellen, the first day I called.'

'I was always tall for my age,' Miss Balgannon explained. 'In fact, I quite outgrew my strength at one time.'

'Wore her hair in ringlets,' Captain Higson informed Trevannion. 'Had a pinafore. With lace on it.'

'Not lace, Captain Higson. It was——'

'Well, you know. Fussy stuff with holes in it. Quaint kid. Hard to get a word out of her.'

Trevannion inclined his head, and smiled at Miss Balgannon. Until her denial of the lace, he had not been sure whether to risk an understanding twinkle which should unite them in amused appreciation of the Captain.

Miss Balgannon smiled back, but without complicity.

'I'm afraid I was very shy. When there were visitors, Mummy had quite a job to get me into the room.'

'I wish I had known you in those days, Miss Balgannon.'

The caress in his voice implied that he would soon have overcome her shyness. Captain Higson grunted.

'Mistake to fuss over kids. Leave 'em alone. Take no notice. They'll come to you. Like animals.'

Trevannion's brows rose politely.

'Or, perhaps, not come to you; also like animals. But I agree. One should always give them time before making any overtures.'

The Captain grunted again, and fell silent. Trevannion took the opportunity to talk to Miss Balgannon, complimenting her on Lily's appearance, and alluding to local matters of which he felt sure the Captain would be ignorant.

But the Captain seemed quite oblivious of the fact that he was being excluded. He sat, weighty, stolid, imperturbable, looking about him, subjecting furniture, fittings, and walls to the same blank stare.

'You've moved that photo of your aunt,' he observed suddenly.

Miss Balgannon swivelled round from Trevannion.

'How very observant you are, Captain!'

'That little ornament's gone. Little china what-you-may-call-it. Brought it to you last visit but three. Got it in Hull.'

'Oh dear. I was afraid you'd notice that. Lily broke it, dusting. She was most distressed, poor child. It's the rarest thing for her to break anything.'

'I'm sure it is,' Trevannion said warmly. The Captain, unmoved, continued to survey the room.

'Doesn't matter,' he said, as an afterthought.

Trevannion tried to re-engage Miss Balgannon, but her attention was distracted, and he had to sit by while she talked for some time of Lily, and of the very few things she had broken in all her time at 'The Beeches'. In fact, there were only three: the ornament, a saucer, and the top of a china teapot, which never fitted properly anyhow, and was always liable to fall off unless one was very, very careful.

Trevannion inwardly decided that the ornament was of the kind that should be well and truly broken. He was regretting that there was no way of politely implying as much, when his opinion was confirmed by Captain Higson, who began to fish in his pocket.

'Reminds me, Ellen. Brought you a knick-knack.'

He extricated a huge handkerchief rolled in a ball, and, unwrapping it, handed Miss Balgannon a shallow, heart-shaped receptacle in mother-of-pearl, standing on three small wheels.

'Women like knick-knacks,' he informed Trevannion.

Miss Balgannon received this novel object with ecstasy, and wondered what it was for. Trevannion peered benevolently.

'An ash-tray,' he pronounced. 'Movable, too.'

Captain Higson gave the faint suggestion of a frown. Trevannion's wish to disparage his gift did not escape him. 'Girl in the shop called it a hair-tidy,' he said.

'To be sure,' cried Miss Balgannon. 'Oh, Captain, thank you so much. What a pretty gift!'

'Most unusual,' Trevannion said, beaming at the Captain. This had put things right. He and Miss Balgannon were at one, indulgently in praise of the outlandish offering.

'I trust your dressing-table is quite level,' Trevannion went on. 'Otherwise you will have to put a paper wedge under one of the wheels, to prevent the hair-tidy from running off the edge.'

The Captain frowned again. It was obvious that he had not considered his gift functionally.

'I don't *think* my table is crooked. Nothing has rolled off so far,' Miss Balgannon said.

'But then, I do not imagine, dear Miss Balgannon—pardon me if I am prying into mysteries—that many of its accoutrements are on wheels. Your hairbrushes, for instance.'

Miss Balgannon went into a nervous twitter of laughter at this suggestion, but the Captain took it at its face value. He stared challengingly at Trevannion.

'What'd be the sense of a hairbrush on wheels?' he demanded.

Trevannion purred.

'Precisely, Captain. Precisely. The same *might* be said of a hair-tidy?'

Captain Higson turned brusquely to Miss Balgannon.

'Thing's an ornament, isn't it? You don't have to use ornaments.'

'No, no, Captain. Of course not.'

'Half the ornaments you see have no sense to 'em. More than half.'

'Quite.' Trevannion's hands made an eloquent, soothing movement. 'Quite.' Then, judging it was now time to propitiate the Captain, he followed his aggrieved 'Very well, then', with a hearty 'You don't have many ornaments on board ship, I'll warrant, Captain?'

Captain Higson either ignored or failed to see this invitation to a masculine understanding.

'What the devil would I want with them?'

Trevannion laughed all down the scale.

'You're a practical man, I see, Captain. Like myself. We have to deal with the harsh realities of life. It's Miss Balgannon here who is the artist. It's to her we come for life's gracious things, for the softer things, the sense of beauty. With her, we realise how much we miss, how much we have forgotten.'

This speech caused Captain Higson to transfer his stare to Miss Balgannon. Clearly, he had never looked on her in this light before, and had no intention of doing so now.

'Rubbish,' he said at last.

Even Miss Balgannon bridled at so uncompromising a rejection. Trevannion's expression hardly changed, but he managed to convey surprise at a solecism.

The Captain himself seemed to feel that something more was needed.

'Artists and all that,' he said. 'Nothing to do with it. I mean, there's men's things and women's things, isn't there?'

'Indubitably. Indubitably.'

'A man's life's one thing, and a woman's another.'

'And perfection only comes when they are blended.'

'Uh?'

'When they are blended. When the best of a man's life and the best of a woman's combine to make a perfect harmony. A harmony such as we are enjoying at this moment, Captain.'

Secure again, he launched on an eloquent appreciation of the feminine element in life, particularly as it was manifest at 'The Beeches', when Lily came in with the tea, and he was obliged to break it off. By moving about, however, and handing bread and butter and cakes, he scored a further point over the immobile Captain Higson. But the Captain made his immobility a weapon. He sat on, showing no disposition to leave, and Trevannion realised with growing irritation that he would have no chance to speak to Miss Balgannon about her room. He stayed as long as he dared,

consoling himself with the thought that the Captain's visits were infrequent and of short duration, and that he would soon have the field to himself.

Then, almost as if he read Trevannion's thoughts, the Captain undermined this assurance.

'Be seeing you oftener from now on, Ellen. No more long trips.'

Trevannion jumped for the opening, and smiled condolence.

'Ah, Captain. *Anno Domini*. We must all bow to it.'

'Nothing of the sort. I'm senior in the Company's service, and they let me choose.'

Trevannion's smile persisted. Then he glanced at the clock, and substituted a look of consternation.

'Good heavens, Miss Balgannon! What an unconscionable time I have stayed. It's too bad. Once I am here, I forget all about time and such mundane matters.'

He clasped her hand in both his, smiled into her eyes, and took a most cordial farewell of Captain Higson, saying what a pleasure it had been to meet him, a pleasure that, happily, might be soon renewed.

The Captain received these courtesies unemotionally, and shook hands, still without rising.

Turning back in the door-way, to wave a hand to Miss Balgannon, Trevannion encountered his straight, uncompromising stare. Did he fancy it, or was there a gleam of irony in the wide eyes, a hostility in the thick and solidly-planted thighs? At any rate, the Captain had outsat him. Yet Trevannion felt well pleased as Lily, all smiles, handed him his hat and stick. He stopped for a minute to talk to her, and went to the gate, feeling her gaze on his back. At the gate, he turned and lifted his hat with a sweeping gesture: then went his way, happy in the knowledge that one person at 'The Beeches' would be wholly in favour of his moving in.

VII

TREVANNION sat in his room, attending to his correspondence. He had eaten his supper, and put the tray outside on the landing table. If he omitted to do this, it would mean that Mrs. Wishart would come in to get it: and Trevannion did not want her in the room while he was working. On the few occasions when she had come in, her barefaced attempts to see what he was at had maddened him. Even if she did not come herself, but sent one of the little Wisharts, these children seemed to be infected with an equal curiosity and even less scruple about gratifying it. The elder, particularly, with her shrill whine and air of sly triumph over ill usage, Trevannion found very hard to bear. He was on principle polite to children. Partly from the streak in his nature which made him hate to be disliked, and partly from genuine benevolence, he could not send the little Wisharts packing when he encountered them. There was, too, the attractive possibility of making them like him and, to that small extent, setting them against their mother; though he knew better than to suppose that anything he could do would weaken the ferocious grip which had made them both into snivelling little time-servers.

The best course was to limit the encounters. So Edna, when she came to get his tray, found it outside on the landing. With no pretext to go into his room—and, poor child, she longed to go in, to have a man to talk to, someone to take notice of her—she had to content herself with standing motionless and listening at the door, until a harsh screech from below recalled her, and she scuttled off with the tray.

Trevannion, his spectacles on his broad nose, was aware of her outside the door, but did not allow the knowledge to disturb his work. He answered his letters one by one, in a fine copper-plate hand, with a signature appropriate to the capacity in which he was replying. If there was an enclosure, a little packet of one shape or another, he took it

from one of the three or four small piles arranged before him on the table. Stamps of different values were in small piles on his right: envelopes lay close to the packets: and the letters he was answering were set out in order on his left. Each operation, each reply was a demonstration of neatness and method: and, although he wrote at a uniform, unhurried pace, with no visible pause for reflection, each letter was carefully composed.

Licking one envelope all along its gummed length he closed and stamped it, added it to a small pile on a chair at his side, and picked up the next letter.

'Dear Gypsy Psychoso,

'I was going with a boy for near eighteen months, I love him very much and I know he loves me really, now he has taken up with another girl, she is not the right one for him really and truly she is not, it is breaking my heart. If he would only once come back to me, he won't see me now but makes excuses, if only he would I know it would be alright, please help me dear Gypsy Psychoso. I enclose P.O., 2/6 like your advertisement said.

'Yours truly,

'Joan Westbury.

'P.S.—Sometimes I think I will go mad so *please* help.'

Trevannion read this through with grave attention, and began immediately to pen his reply.

'Dear Joan,

'A case like yours is very difficult, but after deep and prolonged meditation vision is vouchsafed to those with the true Forward Sight, and while unlike so many so-called Seers, I never guarantee complete success, I prescribe in your case a double treatment which has been effective in the most stubborn and intractable cases.

'I enclose:

'(a) A drawing of an ancient Gypsy charm, which you are to look at intently for five minutes each night before you go to bed:

'(b) A philtre of the greatest virtue. You have only to introduce a few grains of the powder into his food or drink, and the effect is startling.

'I realise that this may not be altogether easy. In that case, you will be well advised——'

He wrote on for two or three minutes, winding up with a postscript.

'The packet I have enclosed allows of one or two doses only. For five shillings you may have a treble-sized packet. If you should wish for a replica of the Charm (some people find greater ease and confidence in handling as well as looking at it) you can obtain one for the nominal price of ten shillings and sixpence, post free.'

With the same even, unhurried motion, not troubling to read over what he had written, Trevannion put the letter and two small packets into an envelope, fastened and stamped it, and went on to the next.

He was half-way through this letter when there was a slithering footstep, a small tap, and in slid Mr. Antrim.

Trevannion, who had made to cover his letter, frowned and relaxed.

'Oh, it's you,' he said, allowing cordiality to succeed an obvious annoyance.

'Yes.' Mr. Antrim gave one of his widest, softest smiles. 'As we were both going down to 'The Peace', and the evening was so fine, I thought I would take the air, and call for you.'

'Very kind, Teddie. Very kind.'

'Not at all.' Mr. Antrim affected to notice for the first time what Trevannion was at. 'But—perhaps I have come too soon? Don't let me disturb you.'

Trevannion glanced at him, then down at his letter. The rims of Mr. Antrim's eyes were red, matching in a horrible way his moist red lips. Trevannion sometimes disliked his appearance so much that he could not look at him.

'Not at all, Teddie. You don't disturb me. I was just—filling in time.'

Mr. Antrim's eyes travelled over the piles of little packets, the stamps, the envelopes. With a half-smile, Trevannion invited his glance to what he was about to enclose with the letter he was writing.

Mr. Antrim nodded gently. He looked towards the open secretary, with its neat compartments stacked with more packages, and continued to nod.

'Do you mind if I just finish this letter? It won't take more than a couple of minutes.'

'Not in the least. Please.'

Trevannion finished the letter, acutely aware of the presence in his room, and needing a real effort to repress his distaste for it. He could deal with his guest well enough when he expected and was ready for him. This sudden appearance made him discern, with surprise, how sharp his instinctive revulsion was. It would not do to let Mr. Antrim perceive it. Or did he, anyhow? Trevannion had to admit that he never knew for certain what was going on behind that bland unlovely countenance.

He coughed, and blotted his letter.

'I profit, like yourself, Teddie, from human credulity.'

'From female credulity,' specified Mr. Antrim softly.

'Do you regard women as sub-human, then?'

Mr. Antrim's brows rose high, making his forehead a mask of furrows.

'No. No,' he pronounced, rounding his lips into a tubular orifice. 'No, Trev. But I gather that the greater part of your clientele is feminine.'

'It is.'

'You help them? You encourage them?'

Trevannion shrugged. 'Should I?'

'They pay you,' sniggered Mr. Antrim. 'They probably expect some satisfaction. You, with your wisdom and understanding, can probably provide it. I expect you are a great comfort and help to them.'

Trevannion got up, and collected his packets. He put them back in the secretary, and shut the lid with a snap.

'You think they deserve help, do you?' His voice had a

note Mr. Antrim had never heard. 'Do you know what nine-tenths of these letters are about?'

'Oh yes. Yes. I think so.'

'Nine-tenths of them,' Trevannion said, facing him, 'are from women asking how they can get back some man who's realised just in time the sort of life he'd have led once they got hold of him.'

'You don't sympathise?'

'Why should I sympathise with the woman, more than with the man who's escaped?'

'He doesn't need much sympathy, surely. In most cases, he's after another woman.'

'Yes, the fool.'

Mr. Antrim giggled. 'Dear, dear. You are bitter.'

'Bitter? I'm realistic. What does a woman do when she gets a man?'

'Don't ask me, Trev. Don't ask me.'

'I'll tell you what she does. She bilks him. One way or another. All women are bilkers. Except the small proportion who are slaves and door-mats and stifle a man. They bilk you every way. Promise anything in the world to get you, and start to default from the first day, once they have. I don't mean only on sex, though plenty of them will do that. All, when it suits them. I mean on every level. Look at the way a girl, who passes as honest, will pretend to be interested in whatever the man's interested in, just in order to get him. The moment she has got him she drops it dead. What's that but bilking?'

Trevannion had flushed almost to purple. He seemed to be speaking under a violent compulsion. Mr. Antrim drew him on.

'Maybe she really believed she was interested in it. Love, you know.'

'She did it to get him. And look what they'll do afterwards. Twist a man to their own purposes; their own convenience. No matter what they said beforehand. No matter what they promised. Once they're safely married, they stop trying to attract their man. They'll change their appearance, dye their hair, do any damn thing without asking him first

—and if he doesn't like it, see how injured they are! He's got to like it, he's got to be still attracted, and if he isn't, he's a brute. At night, they'll smear their gob with some filthy bloody cream, so that a man can't get near them, and then, what a song and dance, what a boo-hooing and baa-haaing, when he rightly and reasonably turns to someone else! I tell you, Teddie—' he banged the table— 'women are the most brutal egotists, the most selfish pack of bitches, that ever yelped to high heaven when they weren't given everything in the world exactly as they wanted it.'

He stood, breathing fast, glaring at Mr. Antrim.

'And then you tell me I ought to help them. Not on your life, Teddie! I batten on them. I prey on them. I make my living by encouraging in them the very things I hate worst about them. At least, a great part of my living. Not all.'

Mr. Antrim regarded him.

'Well, well, Trev. You surprise me. I'd no idea you felt so strongly on the subject.' He picked up his hat. 'Some woman must have treated you very badly.'

Trevannion withdrew into himself.

'I don't base an entire belief on a single case,' he said coldly.

'No. But a single experience can give one a bias, can it not? Well, well. I'd no idea you were such a misogynist. Your manner—forgive me—your manner with women would not suggest you had so poor an opinion of them.'

'My manner is part of my livelihood.'

'Possibly. And yet—again you must forgive me—I can't help feeling that your bark is worse than your bite. Yes. In spite of all you have said, you contemplate becoming involved with the spinster lady—what's her name—Miss Bagganion.'

'That's quite different,' Trevannion told him grimly. 'She's not getting me. I'm getting her.'

'You do not anticipate that she, too, will balk?'

'She'll get no chance. She'll take what she's given. And be grateful.'

'She belongs, perhaps, to the slave or door-mat minority?'

'Rather than the other. Yes. But it doesn't matter which. I shall be in command there. Come on, Teddie.' He had recovered, and spoke with good humour. 'Let's go. I'm thirsty.'

'You must be, after such a commination. I am quite dry from listening to it.'

Trevannion held open the door.

'I am sorry to have inflicted my views upon a romantic like yourself.'

Mr. Antrim threw up his head and gave a squeal of laughter.

'A romantic! Me! Oh dear. You will be the death of me, Trev, you really will.'

They went down the steps, into the balmy air of the May evening.

'And yet, in a way, you know, you're quite right. I am, at heart, still, in spite of all disillusionments, a romantic.'

'But you don't let it interfere with business.'

'No. I have found it safer and wiser to keep it out of professional activities.'

'I can believe you.'

They turned out of Hawker Street into the main street. Trevannion acknowledged a salute. He was quite himself again.

'Tell me, Trev,' Mr. Antrim said. 'There was one thing I meant to ask you. Did you ever, in your knowledge of this locality, run across anyone of the name of Pipes?'

'Pipes? I don't think so. It's not a name one would forget.'

'I wondered if, perhaps, in your connection with the Company? There were two policies paid up. An elderly couple. They died, one morning, very suddenly.'

Trevannion looked at him, all attention.

'The cause of death,' Mr. Antrim went on, 'was given as gastro-enteritis.'

'The epidemic. The endemic, I should say.'

'Precisely. The doctor did not certify, as he had not attended the family for a considerable time.'

'Was there no inquest?'

'No. The Coroner was satisfied with the medical report.'
'When was this?'

'Between sixteen and seventeen years ago.'

'I have worked for the Company only eleven. But, in any case, if the Coroner was satisfied——?'

'Quite. Quite. There was a son. He and his parents. were not on very good terms. He worked in the dye-works.'

Mr. Antrim was looking blandly straight in front of him.

'What is your interest in all this, Teddie? Or need I not ask?'

'The bone of contention—if I may so describe her'—he giggled again—'was a very attractive young woman who served in a bar. I gather the parents were strongly opposed to the idea of her becoming their daughter-in-law. Or would have been, if the idea had been mooted—I don't know. At any rate, the old couple died very suddenly one morning, after eating their breakfast. The son was very much upset.'

'And the point at which you come in, Teddie?'

'The son duly married the very attractive young woman. Maybe she was one of your bilkers, Trev. She certainly wasn't a door-mat. But he deserted her, shortly before the birth of a child.'

'And——?'

'She came to consult me.'

'On what?'

'The chances of finding him.'

'Why didn't she go to the police?'

'Exactly, Trev. Exactly. With your customary acumen, you have gone straight to the point.'

'I see.' Trevannion took off his hat to a woman on the far side of the street. 'You're not still looking for him, are you, after all these years? You don't think he's here, in Dycer's Bay?'

'No. But——'

'But what?' He turned the upper part of his body to look at Mr. Antrim. 'What's put all this into your mind, Teddie?'

'I may as well make a clean breast of it, Trev. I've had a letter from the young woman—well, she's not so young now. She may be coming to this locality.'

'I see. She paid you something on account, and, even though it's all those years ago, she'd like to know what you're doing about it.'

'My interest in locating Mr. Pipes'—Mr. Antrim's voice was very soft—'would not depend entirely on her.'

'How does she know about it, if she wasn't in on it?'

'In on it? Wait a moment, Trev. You're travelling a little fast.'

'You needn't be so cautious, Teddie. The old couple were bumped off: isn't that what you're telling me? The son did it. The girl isn't in on it, or she wouldn't have got on to you to find him. Stop a minute, though. She might have, unofficially. That was why she didn't go to the police. But—no, that's unlikely, because in that case she wouldn't be writing to you now.'

'No?'

'Emphatically no. If you had known her secret for sixteen months, let alone sixteen years, she would not be seeking you out. You might be looking for her. She might have drowned herself, or put her head in a gas oven. But she wouldn't be writing to you.'

'Your reasoning is acute, Trev, yet it might be faulty. A regular but relatively small remittance may in some cases be preferred. However, in this instance there is nothing of the kind. The relationship was on orthodox professional lines.'

'I see. Why is she coming to Dycer's Bay?'

'She did not say positively that she was,' Mr. Antrim said.

'All right then. What made her consider the possibility?'

'That, again, she did not tell me. No. It is merely that, if she does decide to come, I should like to have some news for her.' Mr. Antrim's giggle sounded again. 'There was a time, a very short time, I admit, when I wondered if you might not be the errant Mr. Pipes. Then I saw that you were far too old.'

Trevannion digested this speech in silence for a couple of seconds. His smile was not altogether friendly.

'Oh,' he said. 'I apologise.'

'For what?'

'For disappointing you.'

'Oh, my dear Trev, I greatly prefer you as you are. As a friend and colleague.'

'I would have been an unprofitable victim, in any case. However—to return to this lady of yours. Do you anticipate that she will be a nuisance?'

'Oh no,' Mr. Antrim said. 'No. I don't think so. If she is, I shall enlist your help, Trev. You are such a success with the ladies.'

2

In pursuance of his design to become Miss Balgannon's tenant, Trevannion paid another call at 'The Beeches'. This time he gave no warning of his intention. Lily, taken by surprise, flushed with pleasure.

'Mr. Trevannion!' she exclaimed: then added, 'Please come in. The Mistress *will* be pleased.'

This artless greeting warmed Trevannion's heart. He beamed on Lily, and realised, suddenly, that she was growing into a very pretty and desirable young woman. The thought of having her to look after him and Miss Balgannon became more than ever attractive. He had hitherto looked upon Lily as a child; and, although his heart was well regulated by his head, and he allowed no prospect of the head being swayed from business by any autumnal susceptibility of the lesser organ, Trevannion could still be charmed as well as charm. Where no matter of business was involved, he could let his heart expand: he could give play to the genuine streak of kindness in his somewhat complex nature. Miss Balgannon was business, plus the attractive thought of being the first man in her life, the giver of good things to a grateful and bewildered recipient. It was all the pleasanter to have Lily, as it were, thrown in.

So, well able to read her admiration, he smiled on her, shook hands, asked how she did in his warmest, most

caressing tone, before speaking of her mistress. About to be shown in, he suddenly caught sight of a large, navy-blue, peaked cap. Trevannion checked, grimaced, and cocked an eye at Lily. Delighted, Lily made a face back.

'Yes, sir. Captain Higson.'

'Rot his bones,' Trevannion said composedly. Lily, shocked, began to giggle. Trevannion caught her arm.

'Pull yourself together, Lily.' He grinned at her, then pretended to look severe. 'You can't show me in like this.'

'Oh, Mr. Trevannion . . . please—' She hid her face, shaking with giggles.

'You mustn't laugh at poor Captain Higson. *He* can't help his face.'

Lily laughed anew. Then, quite suddenly, she stood up, and set her cap straight. She was prim, proper, severe.

'Ssh.' She rebuked him: and stood, composing herself, a flush on her smooth cheeks. Trevannion, enchanted by the change, thought he had never seen her look so well.

'Mr. Trevannion, ma'am.'

Miss Balgannon arose in a flutter. The Captain swung round stiffly on his great planted buttocks—as if, Trevannion thought, a gasometer were constrained to revolve.

The conversation that followed was in no sense an exchange. It consisted of an easy, courteous flow from Trevannion, agitated and irrelevant exclamations from Miss Balgannon, grunts and silence from the Captain. The Captain resented Trevannion's arrival, and showed it. Trevannion, at the top of his form, stayed only long enough to establish this to a degree that seriously embarrassed poor Miss Balgannon. The more boorish Captain Higson became, the more suave and charming was Trevannion's manner towards him. Then, judging his moment, Trevannion excused himself.

Miss Balgannon, in an anguish of indecision, got up from her chair.

'I—oh—pardon me, Captain Higson, for one moment.'

She came out with Trevannion into the little hall, clasping her hands. Trevannion was all tenderness, all consideration.

'I am sorry, my dear Miss Balgannon, that my visit was so ill-timed. I had no business to drop in like that, without warning. The fact is, I was just passing the door, on my way back to my landlady's, and—well—the temptation was irresistible.'

He was away before she could say anything, but a glow had come into her troubled eyes, and she stood to watch him go. Then, with a little sigh, not unobserved by Lily, who had stood by, deprived of her office as seer-off, she went back to the Captain.

Trevannion was well pleased with the episode, which he judged to have had three good results. It had strengthened his position with Miss Balgannon, and with Lily; and it had established beyond doubt that Captain Higson disliked him. Well! Trevannion rubbed his hands. Now he need have no scruple about running rings around that costive and fubsy mariner. The epithets pleased him, and he repeated them aloud: costive and fubsy. Sure enough, as evidence of his success, he received the next afternoon a note from Miss Balgannon, asking him to tea on the following Wednesday. She could hardly apologise in so many words for the Captain's incivility, but, to Trevannion, every line of her letter proclaimed her sensitiveness to it, and her regret.

The letter delighted him. He penned a grateful acceptance of the invitation, adding that it was a pleasure to see her in any circumstances: in any company, he almost wrote, but decided that would be too pointed. Captain Higson was, after all, an old friend of her parents. The best way to score off him would be to shine by contrast.

When Wednesday afternoon came, however, he found not only the Captain there, but Mrs. Bracegirdle. Miss Balgannon had not the strength of mind to exclude the Captain, who was soon about to go on an unexpected trip, by particular request of his employers; and she had shrunk from presiding unaided at another encounter between him and Trevannion. In her difficulty she appealed to her friend, who was only too happy to make a fourth, and looked forward to what promised to be an amusing occasion.

Trevannion's first feeling was one of anger. Noting Mrs. Bracegirdle's observation of him, and a mocking glint in the eye of Captain Higson, he affected surprise and pleasure. Miss Balgannon, probably wishing to explain the Captain's presence (at least, this was the interpretation Trevannion put upon it) told him of the impending voyage: and he turned this to immediate advantage by warmly congratulating the Captain, in words that suggested the feat was remarkable for one of his advanced years. Miss Balgannon echoed this, and the Captain was obliged to accept it as a compliment: but it annoyed him, and he showed his annoyance.

Miss Balgannon then suggested a turn in the garden, to give Lily a chance to set the tea, an operation not at all easy in the small drawing-room, with four people looking on. Trevannion at once offered his arm to his hostess, and led her out, the Captain doing the same for Mrs. Bracegirdle. There was not much room in the garden, but the two couples made a slow perambulation, Trevannion admiring the flowers, and the Captain treating Mrs. Bracegirdle to a long and involved anecdote about the behaviour of a Lascar bosun who, from what Trevannion could hear of it, appeared early in the voyage to have gone out of his mind. The widow received it with suitable exclamations of wonder, encouraging the Captain to lead her as far away as he could, lowering his tones, until Trevannion could hear nothing but a kind of rusty rumbling. At all events, it appeared to satisfy Mrs. Bracegirdle, who promptly broke into a peal of laughter, and declared that the Captain would be the death of her: a prospect which he appeared to relish.

Irritated for some reason, and made nervous, Trevannion found it harder than ever to concentrate on his hostess, and she, half consciously aware of this, felt that she was doing badly, and was driven into fresh flutterings of irrelevance. It was a relief to them both when Lily appeared in the door-way, tinkling an unnecessary little bell, and announcing that tea was served.

Seeing that the Captain was waiting, so as to bring up the

rear with the widow, Trevannion stopped to admire a rose all over again, and detained Miss Balgannon for so long that the Captain was obliged to go first. He steered Mrs. Bracegirdle into the passage so swiftly that Trevannion, alert to a new possibility, all but hurried Miss Balgannon off her feet in the effort to keep him under observation. He was rewarded by seeing the Captain's arm round Mrs. Bracegirdle's waist, giving it an obvious and hearty squeeze. To do her credit, Mrs. Bracegirdle seemed surprised. She drew away, and murmured what sounded like a protest. Captain Higson replied gravely that, in a following sea, it was his invariable practice to bring her up to windward.

Trevannion hid a grin, and his opinion of the Captain rose several pegs. Whether Miss Balgannon had seen the incident he could not tell.

For these and other reasons, the meal began in silence. The Captain appeared to be nursing some private source of pleasure. He said nothing at all and looked downwards, but his eyes moved actively from side to side, and the corners of his mouth twitched. Mrs. Bracegirdle's colour was a little higher than usual, and she, too, looked as if her thoughts were demanding attention. Trevannion deliberately kept quiet, in the hope that a situation would arise which he could retrieve with a flourish, and poor Miss Balgannon, aware that things were not going aright, was thereby thrown into such anxiety that she could say nothing sensible at all. In her desperation she made openings so silly that Mrs. Bracegirdle, her social sense returning, could do nothing with them: and the conversation, for the first five minutes or so, had, as Trevannion told Walter later in the evening, the animation of a mortuary chapel.

Just as Trevannion decided things were bad enough for his intervention, the Captain turned red in the face and began to laugh. He laughed till he almost choked. Tears ran down his cheeks.

'Once saw a nigger run over by a steam-roller,' he explained, as soon as he could speak. 'He was walking in front of it. He saw something, and stopped to look, and forgot about the roller. It began with his left foot. He was

so surprised. Never forgotten the look on his face. Laugh whenever I remember it.'

And he went off into another paroxysm. Intentionally or not, he had indeed caused a diversion. The widow exclaimed indignantly at his want of feeling: Miss Balgannon looked as if she were undecided whether to faint or be sick: and Trevannion did his best, by raising his brows and paying attention to his hostess, to register his protest against a solecism.

But the Captain, a simple soul, continued to chuckle and heave, and by the releasing alchemy of his laughter, the whole absurd spectacle of a man of his age amused by so unsuitable a theme, their constraint was dispelled. The widow bit her lip, caught Trevannion's eye, and began to giggle. Trevannion, hands on knees, shook with slow, indulgent laughter. Even Miss Balgannon smiled weakly, and dabbed her eyes in thankfulness that things had taken this sudden turn for the better.

The Captain had certainly saved the situation. Inside a minute, they were all talking at once, adjuring each other to have fresh cups of tea, passing round the cakes, drawn together in their own despite by a glow of friendship. The Captain told story after story, revealing a mixture of shrewdness and naïveté which even Trevannion had to admit was attractive. And when, watching his chance, Trevannion countered with fresh stories of Mrs. Wishart and her household, the Captain did him the honour of chuckling in return.

The two men met each other's eye, and in each was a guarded appreciation. For the time, at any rate, their enmity was laid aside. It was an amnesty rather than a treaty of peace, but while it lasted it was genuine and allowed a flow of spontaneous good will. Mrs. Bracegirdle sparkled, laughed and exclaimed, and Miss Balgannon, dimpling and twinkling, thanked heaven for a miracle which had turned her tea-party from a disaster into a brilliant success.

The four sat for a long time in this happy and affable exchange, and parted on the most cordial terms, with all kinds of good wishes for the Captain on his voyage, and

repeated promises from him to bring gifts and mementoes on his return.

Not till he was turning into Hawker Street did Trevannion recall that it was Captain Higson who had saved the day. He resolved to risk no more setbacks, but to make the most of the Captain's absence, and be safely installed in 'The Beeches' before his return.

VIII

'No, no, Gummick.'

The Mountaineer was admonishing Stan, waving a bony finger, as Mr. Antrim stepped into the room. Walter was looking on, smiling: Trevannion bestowed his bland indulgence on the scene: and a man new to Mr. Antrim, bald, rubicund, wearing a chauffeur's uniform, sat holding a pint mug and grinning broadly.

'No, no, Gummick. It won't do. We can't have you going around defacing the image of God.'

Stan blinked at him, startled.

'Come off it, Mount,' protested Walter, in his lazy West Country drawl. 'That's pitching it a bit high.'

The Mountaineer's head, bird-like on its skinny neck, turned towards him.

'God created man in his own image,' he proclaimed.

The chauffeur chuckled.

'I reckon Sid Prodger is more like one o' them there heathen immidges,' he said. 'I see one in a junk shop, only the other day. Quite a look of 'im, it 'ad.'

'Sid ain't no picture,' Stan agreed.

Trevannion's voice, precise, well modulated, flowed out across the room.

'I can just understand God making Sid Prodger, but not looking on him afterwards and seeing that he was good.'

'Trevannion!' The Mountaineer's voice outbid him. 'Do not blaspheme.'

'I think it far more irreligious to suggest that a cross-eyed ruffian like Sid Prodger is made in the image of his Creator.'

'Now, now, you two,' Walter said. 'Don't you start talking theology. Mr. Antrim: arbitrate. Tell them to keep the peace.'

'Yes, Teddie.' Trevannion made room for him on the settle. 'Come and compose our differences for us. Oh—by the way—I don't think you have met our friend George?'

The chauffeur carefully put down his pint, and rose.

'I haven't had the pleasure,' Mr. Antrim said.

'George—this is our new friend Mr. Antrim, of whom you will have heard us speak.'

'The legal gentleman? Honoured, I'm sure.'

'Teddie—this is our old and valued friend, George Dubbidge. The only member of our little circle whom you have not met.'

The two shook hands.

'Dubbidge. Gummick,' Mr. Antrim said. 'What musical names you have in these parts.'

'I'm not musical,' George Dubbidge assured him. 'I can't 'ardly tell one toon from another. Now, my brother-in-law Bert,——'

'That is not what Mr. Antrim means,' Trevannion explained. 'He appears to take pleasure in the sound of your name, which he supposes to be of local origin. To belong to Dycer's Bay.'

'That it don't,' said the name's owner. 'It's a Gloucestershire name, Dubbidge is. Painswick, and such parts. Devonshire, too. Reg'ler nest o' Dubbidges, in Totnes. Run into 'em when I was drivin' for an old gent last summer but one. 'E went to the 'otel, and give me 'alf a crown for me lunch, same as 'e always did, and I goes in search of a place where I'll get better value, see, and on the way, over a door, painted in white letters, what do I see——'

'Dubbidge,' said Trevannion.

'Henery Dubbidge,' George corrected him. 'Licensed to sell beer, spirits, and tobacco. So I went in there, and fell into conversation, and blow me if it didn't turn out there was two more Dubbidges in the town. A small little town, it is, too.'

'A surprising coincidence,' commented Mr. Antrim.

'Yes.' George beamed. 'That's what I said to my wife, when I got home. A coincidence. Surprising, as you say.'

'To my ear,' said the Mountaineer, 'the name Dubbidge notably lacks music. A homely name, an honest name, a rustic name. But musical—no.'

'I never said as——'

'It would never do in the Profession. On the boards. It lacks appeal.'

George was pink.

'The Dubbidge is very well looked up to in Gloucestershire. A very old yeoman family. In Devon too, I dare say, for the matter o' that.'

'No one is aspersing their honesty, my good George. Nor their respectability.'

George sat back, relieved. His beam returned.

'No, no,' the Mountaineer continued. 'I was only saying that the evocative power of the name, its euphony, does not render it suitable for Professional purposes.'

'I don't know,' said Trevannion. 'I should have thought it was every bit as euphonious as yours. And as evocative.'

'My dear sir! Watteau—the exquisite, the great French painter.'

'Wotto, she bumps!'

'You are coarse, Trevannion. You are offensive.'

'Not at all. I'm only saying that I'd as soon be called Dubbidge as Wotto. "Horace Dubbidge, Illusionist and Conjurer".' He intoned it with his full voice. 'That has a fine sound.'

'It has not a fine sound. It has an absurd sound. The two names are wholly incongruous.'

'Come between us, Teddie. Arbitrate. Keep the balance.'

'I thought it a very pleasant sounding name, as I said,' Mr. Antrim observed.

'I grieve for your ear, lawyer. Chicanery has blunted it.'

Mr. Antrim shrugged and smiled. Trevannion and the Mountaineer continued to wrangle, but without heart: Trevannion lazy, the Mountaineer more academic than annoyed. Listening, Mr. Antrim felt a tap on his knee, and turned to find George looking at him earnestly.

'What you was saying just now about musical. I ain't musical, not a bit of it. But my brother-in-law Bert, he's a wonder. Been musical all his life. From a boy. The band-master, he came up the steps to Bert's dad. "Mr. Peters," he says; "it's a crool shame that boy not to be in the band, with the feelin' 'e 'as for the flute," he says. But Bert's dad,

'e slams the door in the bandmaster's face, and pushes Bert into the Post Office, and Bert stays there forty year—but deevoted to the flute, mind you, deevoted to it, all the time. Now, Dorrie, that's Bert's wife, she's my sister, 'e's my brother-in-law, see, Dorrie, she don't care for the flute. "Dorrie, my girl," I says to 'er, "don't you be a fool," I says. "There's worse than flutes," I says. "It might be drink, or women." "Yes, I know," she says. "But that would be off the premises."'

Mr. Antrim blinked. He was disconcerted not only by the energy with which George directed this speech upon him, but by the earnest air of expectancy which followed it. Some comment seemed to be required. He did his best.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. I see her point. I see yours too,' he added hastily, for George's eyes began to cloud, and it was evident that he might try to explain it all again.

'Ah.' George sat back, satisfied. The beam returned to his amiable face. In a way, he was like Stan: not to look at, for he had once been dark, and his features were differently arranged from Stan's: but there was a likeness in temperament. George's was a sunnier, one might say a sillier nature. Life had not forced on him that slow, reluctant, brooding knowledge of its less pleasant aspects which cast a shadow over Stan. George would never startle one with his realisation of the dark side of the world. His perception did not go beyond inconveniences and incongruities. A determination to look on the bright side had so dazzled and bemused him that catastrophe shrank to small, even to laughable proportions.

Having, as he thought, found a sympathetic listener, he proceeded to pour out a stream of information about his family and relatives, which Mr. Antrim found great difficulty in following. The task was made harder by George's use of Christian names and his failure to realise that the listener would not immediately know to whom they referred. After some ten minutes of biography without index, Mr. Antrim began to pant, as if the room were too hot.

Trevannion noticed, and came to his rescue.

'You seem in great form, George. What's the matter? Been to a funeral?'

George turned on him a gaze of wonder.

'As it 'appens, I 'ave. How did you know?'

'Funerals always set you talking. You seem to like them.'

'That I don't.' George shook his head decisively. 'Can't abide 'em.'

'Melancholy occasions,' sympathised Mr. Antrim.

'It ain't that. Oh, well, there *is* that, o' course. People ain't very cheerful, not at a funeral. But I weren't thinkin' o' that side of it.'

'What side were you thinking of?' Trevannion asked him.

'I was thinkin' of me cars. Crool on the clutch, funerals are. Drivin' slow. I burned out two clutches in one year, on funeral orders. Weddin's, too. They makes a lot o' work. This 'ere confetti. You gets the car full of it. You *think* you've got it all out, after, but 'ave you? Your next order, it's for a funeral. In they gets, womp they goes on the cushions, up comes a cloud o' confetti—and it's unsuitable, see? They don't like it.'

He gazed earnestly at Mr. Antrim, who nodded approval.

'Very natural,' he said. 'Very understandable.'

George's face cleared once again.

'I'm glad you understand,' he replied. 'There's some as don't.'

And he sat back and took a long pull at his pint, leaving Mr. Antrim to speculate upon conversational abysses beyond the range of his experience.

'Whose funeral was it, George?' Walter asked him. 'Old Askew's?'

'That's right. Very big function, it was. The Mayor was there. *And* the Town Clerk.'

The Mountaineer turned as if he had been stung.

'The blackguards. The scoundrels. What have they been doing?'

'Attending of a funeral, Mount.'

'Their own, I trust.'

'No. Not yet.'

'I am sorry to hear it.'

'I wouldn't call our worthy Mayor a blackguard,' Trevannion observed. 'A fool, perhaps. Pompous. Confused. But not a blackguard. For one thing, he hasn't the sense.'

'The entire municipality of this town is corrupt, scandalous, and blackguardly.'

'Well—that's a good debating position, Mount. But you flatter them.'

'Flatter them! I! who have never said a good word for one of the whole dastardly crew!'

He had risen to his feet, eyes flashing.

'Keep your hair on, Mount. No need to get excited. I don't mean you go out of your way to pay them compliments. All I mean is that when you call them blackguards——'

'They are blackguards. Every man of them.'

'—When you call them blackguards, you give them credit for enough sense to go crooked on purpose.'

Walter took the indignant Mountaineer by the arm, and soothed him back into his seat. Mr. Antrim turned to Trevannion.

'What is the Mayor like?'

Trevannion chuckled.

'Always on his oath. Summons up his full powers to answer you whatever you ask him. Goes into conference with himself, and gives you an affidavit.'

'An affidavit from such a fellow would be valueless,' the Mountaineer declared. 'Take my advice, lawyer. Give no credence to such a document.'

'It's all right, Mount. He hasn't got one.'

'Do not palter with me, Trevannion. I distinctly heard you say——'

'I shall place no confidence in any document signed by the Mayor,' Mr. Antrim assured him, 'or by any member of the municipality.'

'You show your wisdom, lawyer. I commend you. I drink to your sagacity.'

'Thank you, Mr. Watteau.'

The Mountaineer frowned, but said nothing. Mr. Antrim,

wondering what he had said wrong this time, was obliged to give his attention to Trevannion.

'As long as you're serious with the Mayor, it's all right. Stare right into his eyes, nod every three seconds, and you'll have no trouble at all. The Town Clerk's different. I'm never sure how much of a fool he is.'

'He's a blackguard,' the Mountaineer interjected.

'Or how much of a knave. He waits a long time to speak, gathers himself up like a grandfather clock, and then shoots it out just in time to save himself from having a seizure. And, when it does come out, it's not worth hearing.'

'It's always a falsehood.'

'Well, well,' tittered Mr. Antrim. 'With two such striking characters, the municipality must be a remarkable body.'

'Shut up about the municipality,' Walter said, 'or Mount will have a seizure, instead of the Town Clerk.'

'I must request you to release my arm, Nutchery. You grow familiar. Release it at once.'

'Promise to sit down, then, and be a good boy.'

'You forget yourself. I cannot permit you to speak to me in this manner.'

'I'll tell you off good and proper in half a minute. Who never came for his lesson this afternoon?'

'What? Did I not? Bless my soul. It must have slipped my memory.'

Walter winked at Mr. Antrim.

'Here was I, come all the way up from home, sitting here, waiting for you. And you never came.'

'Good heavens! I had entirely forgotten. I ask your pardon, my dear fellow. I am truly sorry.'

'All right. You sit quiet and be good, and we'll say no more about it.'

'But let me assure you——'

'Ssh. That's all right.' Walter patted his shoulder. 'You do what teacher says.'

And, with a docility that surprised Mr. Antrim, the tall preposterous figure subsided.

Trevannion, seeing him silent, began to tell a story. It was short and well pointed. All laughed except the Mount-

zineer, who wore a pained, frustrated expression, and kept glancing at Walter, almost in appeal. It was evident to the surprised Mr. Antrim that he considered himself on his honour to keep silent. Trevannion went on to describe a scene at his landlady's, an altercation with her and the milkman as protagonists, and the little Wisharts as chorus. He imitated the voices well, and the company laughed readily. The Mountaineer chafed and bit his lip. His professional sense was outraged: he bore ill that Trevannion should hold the floor.

Walter good-naturedly released him.

'Does it a treat, Mount, doesn't he?' he asked.

The Mountaineer rose nobly to the bait.

'He is not without a certain talent, I admit. But he lacks experience. Style. Technique. It is one thing to imitate the voices of children in a room of this size, but quite another to project them across a large auditorium. Our friend would fail to reach the circle, or he would be hoarse by the second house.'

Trevannion rolled an eye at him. He did not altogether relish the criticism.

'Mount's always lecturing us,' he told Mr. Antrim. 'Not that he's exactly up to date.'

'Now then,' Walter said. 'No arguments, gentlemen. No rude words.'

'There was a boxer on the 'alls,' Stan put in peacefully, 'as imitated children very clever. Middle-weight. Useful boy.'

'Name?'

'Ted Wilcock. Don't 'speck you'd 'ave 'eard of 'im.'

'Why shouldn't we have heard of him?' Trevannion asked.

'E weren't very well known, to the gen'ral public.'

'You always wish to convict us of ignorance, Stanley. We are not all as ignorant as you think. Some of us were following boxing before you were born.'

'I didn't mean to critickise nobody,' Stan explained anxiously. 'I only meant I didn't expeck you'd 'ave 'eard of 'im.'

'Had you?' Walter watched Trevannion with a satiric eye.

'That is neither here nor there,' Trevannion retorted. 'I object to Stanley's assumption that we are all babes in arms on the subject of boxing. He need not imagine that he is the only one who knows anything about it.'

George Dubbidge, who had been reading the local paper, suddenly looked up.

'Ere's something in your line, Trev. It's in this here bit called "ask Dolores about it."'

'What's the question?' Walter asked him.

'It's someone writing, a young woman judgin' by the signature, and she says, "Dear Dolores," she says, "My father-in-law has come to live with us, and nothing I can do is right. He keeps on naggin' at me about how my husband's mother used to do it so much better, until I feel I could scream. What ought I to do?"' Eh, Trev?'

'Bop the old bastard on the nob,' Trevannion replied.

The Mountainer was shocked.

'Mischievous,' he declared. 'I have always had the gravest misgivings about the advice you give to the unfortunate people who consult you.'

Trevannion was not mollified. He continued to gaze rather sourly at Stan.

'A great number of boxers have appeared on the halls,' he said. 'There is nothing unusual in that. Jack Johnson——'

'I know,' Stan said, 'but in exhibition bouts, or demonstrations of trainin'. There isn't so many what does turns, like.'

'Jack Johnson never did anything else in this country, did he?' Walter asked. 'After he became champion, I mean.'

'Yes 'e did. 'E fought Ben Taylor, the Woolwich Infant, at Plymouth.'

'Wonderful names they had, for them coloured boxers. The Boston Tar-Baby. The Harlem Coffee-Cooler.'

'That was Sam Langford. And Frank Craig.'

'Is it true Johnson was afraid to meet Langford?'

'May of bin. 'E was older.'

'I've been told they did fight once, and Langford won.'

'That's a favourite story,' Stan said. 'They did meet, and Johnson won, pretty easy. But it was early on before Langford had had so much experience.'

Walter and Joe Blake, who had come in during these exchanges, started to interfere when Stan, who spoke with the immediate certainty of an encyclopaedia, Trevannion to his right in this had watched it with an unfriendly gleam in his eye burning in himself. Mr. Antrim, noting this, heard with surprise that, although articulating, Trevannion was not saying recognizable words, but strange agglomerations of syllables. He strained his ear, thinking it was a foreign language trying to recognise it.

Let a lot of garbling go.

One clear glint when going—

Trevannion sang, or some such words. Mr. Antrim could make nothing of them. Whatever they were, Trevannion was putting them quietly to himself with a kind of cruel relish, his eyes on Stan. Then, by degrees, his expression changed and he appeared to be following the conversation with enjoyment.

Stan was on the subject of American heavy-weights.

'Yes,' Trevannion said. 'And then there was Joe Lingard. He began as a dental mechanic.'

'Lingard?' Stan started, and turned a suspicious face. 'I never 'eard of 'im.'

'He boxed a draw with Pelky, way back in 1906 or '7. You know Pelky. Billy Wells met him in America.'

'I know all about Pelky, but I never 'eard tell of Joe Lingard. Frank Moran was a dentist, but—'

'This chap was a dentist's mechanic. Ah. Yes. There are lots of names we old-timers like to recall. There was Ben Truby, from Redruth: one of the cleverest light-weights who ever put on a glove. He was a miner. Died young. Got silicosis. Then there was the first Jack Dempsey, the middle-weight—'

'I know about 'im, but—'

'There was George Liddle, the printer's apprentice. He

went to America, and put up a very good show against Al Wolgast.'

'When?' Stan demanded.

'Don't expect me to remember the date, Stan. We have not all your knowledge. There was Lefty Craggs, another light-weight (good light-weights were ten a penny then). There was Bandsman Blake——'

'I know about 'im. 'E was——'

'There was Benny Duplex, and Chips Morgan, who was a steward on a liner. There was George Battiscombe, of Barnstaple. And Jericho Dupps, the black—sparring partner to Joe Jeanette. All names to be cherished by those of us who followed the game in our young days.'

Stan's face was crimson. He was almost in tears.

'I never 'eard of 'alf them names,' he protested.

'I'm not surprised, Stan.' Trevannion was all gentleness and fatherly compassion. 'You can hardly expect to know every name in the boxing calendar, talented though you are. It is always a marvel to me how you remember as many as you do.'

This tribute, as was intended, increased Stan's unhappiness. He sat, staring dully at Trevannion, who began to talk about something else to Mr. Antrim. Finally he looked at the floor a yard or so in front of him, his face still red and mortified, his brow furrowed.

He did not even rouse when the Mountaineer proclaimed his opinion that prize-fighters were a disgrace to the halls, and should never be allowed. Accused by Trevannion of fearing competition and favouring a closed shop, the Mountaineer became exceedingly dignified, and explained at great length that he was not in the least interested in the commercial aspect of the matter, but was jealous of the interests and prestige of a noble calling. Joe Blake, winking, took the Mountaineer's side, and George Dubbridge grinned peacefully over the top of his paper.

The argument ended, as usual, in the Mountaineer's taking offence and having to be pacified. Luckily, this was not difficult. His excitements died down as quickly as they rose.

'You won't be able to argufy like this next week,' Joe informed them. 'You'll have to mind yourselves.'

'Why, Joe?'

'I have a barmaid coming.'

'For heaven's sake!' Trevannion turned on him. 'You're not going to put a giggling peroxide little piece in on us.'

'She's not what you'd call a girl, and she has no peroxide. She's dark, and a woman o' some maturity. Thirty-six to forty, I'd say.'

'What's her name?' George wanted to know.

'Miss Jones.'

In the midst of all the comment that followed, Walter, seeing his chance, came over to Stan.

'Move up, Stan boy.'

Stan, sunk in his misery, made room for him.

'Cheer up,' Walter said. 'He was only having you on.'

Stan turned to him a blank look of bewilderment.

'I can't make it out,' he said. 'I'd a swore there weren't no such chaps. I never 'eard of 'em.'

'No more did Trev.'

'Wot?'

'He was pulling your leg, Stan boy. He made 'em up.'

'Made 'em up!'

'Yes. Didn't you spot that?'

'But—but why?'

'To spite you. To shut you up.'

'Shut me up! Why for? I weren't doin' 'im no 'arm.'

'Oh yes you were, Stan. You were talking too much. We were all listening to you, instead of him.'

Stan's brow corrugated in the slow effort to understand.

'But—but—some of 'em were all right. I knew some of 'em.'

'That was just Trev's artfulness; to have you on better.'

'Cor!'

Stan stared, endeavouring to adjust his mind to something far outside it. Watching him affectionately, Walter realised it was not the petty malice that shocked him, but the wicked levity, the blasphemy against the sacred annals of boxing.

Suddenly Stan turned to him.

'Ow do you know?'

'How do I know what, Stan?'

'That Trev was makin' them names up?'

'Two things, Stan. One was the way he started singing to himself before he did it. D'you hear him?'

'Can't say I did. I weren't listenin'.'

'Two or three times before, I've noticed him do that. Ugly sort of singing. Ugly sounds he makes. It always means he's annoyed, and he's going to do something spiteful. Then, I saw the look in his eye when he began saying all those names.' He smiled. 'I know Trev. I ought to, after all these years.'

Stan shook his head in wonder. It was all too much for him.

Leaning close, Walter spoke in a whisper.

'I'll even it up for you, Stan. I've got one up my sleeve for him.'

Stan shook his head. He felt no personal grievance at all.

Not for half an hour or more did Walter get his chance. He did not wish to bring up the subject himself, and Trevannion, once more in the centre of the stage, was holding forth on subjects remote from the titbit of news which Walter was saving for him.

At last, in despair, Walter sidled up to George.

'Any advertisement for lodgings in the paper, George?'

George looked up at him in surprise.

'I expeck so. There usually is. Let's have a look.' He turned the paper over. 'Yes. 'Ere you are. 'Alf a column of 'em. Why? Not thinking of moving, are you?'

'Oh no. It's not for me. I was wondering about Trev. He's always complaining about that Mrs. Wishart. Didn't he say he was moving?'

'Come to think of it, I believe 'e did. Trev!'

Trevannion was in the middle of an anecdote. George, once he had an idea in his head, was not one to worry about a little thing like that.

'Trev!' he repeated.

Trevannion turned. 'Yes?' he said shortly.

'We're lookin' up a new place for you.'

'A new place?'

'Yes. New lodgin's. Didn't you say you wanted to move?'

'That's very kind of you, George. But you needn't trouble. I have made my arrangements.'

Walter looked up.

'Where are you going, Trev?' he asked casually.

'Well—I didn't intend to say anything about it until I had actually moved in. But—ah—you may take it as certain that in a very few days I am moving into Miss Balgannon's, at 'The Beeches'.'

Walter looked surprised. 'Are you sure?'

'As sure as I can be, without actually being in possession.'

Walter continued to look unconvinced.

'I thought she had only the one room,' he said.

'One suite,' Trevannion corrected him. 'Sitting-room and bedroom.'

'In that case, Trev, I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment.' He paused, to gain everyone's attention. 'Miss Balgannon has just let her rooms to a friend of hers, called Mrs. Bracegirdle.'

There was a silence. Trevannion stared at him, his face blotching.

'You must be mistaken, Walter. Yes.' The blood came back. 'You have been misinformed.'

Walter shook his head. 'Straight from the horse's mouth.'

'How do you know?'

'Mrs. Bracegirdle lodges with a friend of my wife's. She told my wife, and my wife told me. Hard luck, Trev. Annoying for you.'

Trevannion's eye gleamed. His lips had gone thin under his moustache.

'I congratulate you, Walter.'

'Me? What on?'

'On happier relations in the home. A short while ago, you and your wife were not on speaking terms.'

He turned his back on Walter, who still smiled faintly; and, to hide the shock he had received, went on with his interrupted story.

IX

THIS SETBACK to his plans made Trevannion all the more determined to carry them out. He became a regular visitor at 'The Beeches', paid particular attention to Lily, and behaved towards Mrs. Bracegirdle with such courtesy and correctness that, although her suspicions of him were in no way lessened, she was forced to admit that he had distinguished manners. He took the further step of buying a new suit, and, calling in it one afternoon, with a hat to match and a pair of yellow gloves, obliged the widow to see him in a new light. This, however, increased her resentment against him. The idea that a man in a position to dress well, and knowing, as he must have known, what distinction good clothes would give to his appearance, should neglect to take these advantages, annoyed Mrs. Bracegirdle greatly. Not only did such conduct show a criminal indifference to the conventions of society: it suggested that Trevannion had been indulging in a discreditable masquerade on purpose to mislead her. She decided, with deep certainty, that he was up to no good.

This conviction received a fillip when she returned one day from an outing to inspect one of the scattered properties acquired by the late Mr. Bracegirdle, and found Miss Baggannon in a state of enthusiasm mingled with misgiving. Trevannion had that afternoon put before her a scheme for building two new rooms over the L-shaped excrescence which contained the scullery, coal-cellar, and other oddments. This, he pointed out, would be a great addition to the value of the house. It would enable her to take a second lodger: and indeed, if she would consider receiving him in that capacity, he would be happy to contribute something to the quite inconsiderable cost of the operation. In any case, if she would leave the matter in his hands, he would be able to secure special terms for her from a builder whom he was in a position to influence.

Miss Baggannon related all this in hushed tones, her eyes

soft with wondering gratitude at Mr. Trevannion's interest and kindness. The widow snorted inwardly, but knew better than to voice any open criticism of the plan. She saw that Trevannion meant to get in; and, looking at the rapt face of his victim, and listening to her gentle flow, she felt impatiently that it would serve Ellen right for being such a fool, if the man got her as well. There might be worse things. The fellow had his attractive side, and, since being victimised in one way or another was the only condition on which Ellen was likely to get a man, it might be better for her to be taken in and done for by a plausible crook, however great her disillusionment afterwards, than be left to die an old maid. Mrs. Bracegirdle, who had never lacked male attention, felt that any was better than none.

So she replied to Miss Balgannon with practical and soothing words, and gave no hint of her deepened suspicion of Trevannion. What was more, and might have puzzled her if she had been one to examine her feelings instead of promptly acting on them, her urgent wish to thwart Trevannion began to fade. If he really wanted to saddle himself with Ellen, in a grim way she almost wished him good luck. He was still virile: her instinct told her that. She guessed at the fun he would have with poor, timid Ellen. Well, damn it all, she suddenly said to herself, a good job too.

The possibility that Captain Higson was after Miss Balgannon she refused to take seriously. In the first place, Ellen thought of him as an old man, the friend of her parents. He produced in her no such disturbances as Trevannion. Also, he wasn't really interested. He was far more interested in May Bracegirdle; and, elderly and settled though he was, there was a masterfulness about him, a confidence, an imperturbability that were much to her taste. With a warm, inward chuckle, she summoned her forces to give the Captain battle. Oh, yes. It was her he favoured, not Ellen.

This belief was strengthened by the receipt of a parcel from the Captain, dispatched from the West Indies, with tangerines and a box of preserved ginger for Miss Balgannon, and for the widow two pieces of silk, a blue

cashmere shawl, and a large bottle of a sluggish and sticky liqueur claiming to be West Indian sherry. These offerings were accompanied by a note, written on a single sheet of yellow, blue-lined paper, smelling faintly of oranges, in stiff phrases, whereby the writer expressed the hope that she was hearty and in good health, trusted that she would like the enclosures, and begged to remain her obedient servant and devoted admirer, William Higson (Capt.). The note was so like him in one way, and in others so unlike—his appearance and bearing without his life, so to speak—that Mrs. Bracegirdle was both amused and touched. The silk and the shawl delighted her. The so-called sherry, after one dubious taste, she handed over to Lily, who kept it in the larder for a week, and finally gave it to the baker's roundsman, who was off duty for several days afterwards.

Meanwhile Trevannion had been to his friend the builder, arranged a substantial commission for himself on the deal, and asked the builder to draw up plans which he could submit to Miss Balgannon. He brought these along, choosing a time when—as ascertained from Lily, via Stan—Mrs. Bracegirdle would be out. This had been difficult, as the widow was lazy, and more than once, having said that she was going to look at this or that property, had decided at the last minute not to go. Trevannion once got to the door, learned from Lily that Mrs. Bracegirdle was still in the house, and was obliged to explain that he wished to see Miss Balgannon on private business, and so would call again. Lily, he could see, would find it hard not to say that he had called, and was incapable of deceit. Still, he felt he could trust to her good sense, and her unconcealed liking for him, to keep her quiet.

When he did at last find her alone, Miss Balgannon was delighted with the plans. Even so, he saw that she was still nervous. To embark on any project, to do anything new, to make any decision at all was difficult for Miss Balgannon. Her precarious balance with the demands of life could be maintained—just—by staying as she was and doing nothing. All Trevannion's eloquence was needed, all the deep warmth of his voice, to persuade her to commit herself to the plan

and agree that the work be put in hand. The builder was occupied on another job, but he hoped to be able to start in about ten days' time.

Miss Balgannon had a sleepless night after that. She clung to Lily's arm in the morning, and it took all Lily's care and tenderness to reassure her. Mrs. Bracegirdle was less comforting than usual. She had lost interest, and felt more impatient than sympathetic with Ellen's flutterings. If she had had any intention of staying on permanently at 'The Beeches', or even for some months, she might have exerted herself to keep Trevannion out. As she had only come for three months at the most, until a little house she had her eye on should fall vacant, she did not trouble her mind whether he came or not. He might persuade Ellen to build a gazebo, or a lighthouse, for all she cared.

Trevannion learned of this just in time, and realised how badly he had over-reached himself. Once he got into 'The Beeches' the last thing he wanted was another tenant. He therefore called on Miss Balgannon and informed her regretfully that difficulties had arisen with the local authorities, who for some reason did not consider the plans satisfactory, and that, what with one thing and another, it would be wise to postpone the whole idea until conditions changed, and it could be gone into again. In the meantime, he could suggest an excellent use for the money she had got ready to pay for the building. The thing to do was to invest it to good advantage, and there was no better form of investment than an endowment insurance policy. He suggested that she should take one out for a thousand pounds, payable on her fifty-fifth birthday. The premium was most reasonable, considering the cover provided: for, should anything happen to her, even a day after she had made the first payment, the entire thousand pounds would be at once payable to her estate. It was to be hoped, needless to say—his boyish smile played affectionately on her—that nothing untoward would happen: and she would have this nice, solid sum to look forward to, while she was still of an age to enjoy it. The whole thing would be no trouble: he had the papers in his pocket. There was the mere formality of a

medical examination, to be arranged at her convenience. She knew the doctor, an elderly man, thoroughly experienced, and most discreet. He would arrange everything.

Flattered, bemused, without will of her own, Miss Balgannon surrendered to the warm flood of his persuasion. She was convinced that he had saved her from a terrible misadventure over the building plan. The thought of difficulty with the local authority made her feel faint, and in her relief and her pleasure that the dear 'Beeches' was to be left intact she would have let Trevannion, her Perseus, her deliverer, persuade her to anything. He left the house, smiling, with her signature in his pocket.

2

Meanwhile, Stan had begun early morning runs in preparation for his fight with Young Woodlock: Walter Nutchery had reached the semi-final of a southern counties championship, opened well with a break of five hundred and twenty-four, and gone to pieces when he seemed bound to win: the Mountaineer had been had up for insulting behaviour towards a municipal official and fined seven and sixpence: and Joe Blake had an addition to his staff.

Mrs. Matt Pipes, who, after parting with her baby daughter seventeen years before, had reverted to her maiden name of Jones, unobtrusively took up her employment as barmaid at 'The Peace'. She had kept her looks to an astounding degree. Her skin remained good, and her colour—apart from a tendency to flush down to her neck in cold weather, or after a good meal. The few strands of white in her still abundant dark hair enhanced rather than detracted from her appearance. Her demeanour behind the bar was modest and quiet, she knew her business, she was quick, clean, and efficient, the customers liked her; and Joe Blake was well pleased.

3

Ten days after Miss Balgannon was persuaded thus to add to her life insurance, there occurred what admirers of W. W. Jacobs would instinctively call the Affair of the Captain's Parrot.

This episode showed once again how something which appears trivial and absurd can have serious results. Whether Captain Higson so designed it, even Mrs. Bracegirdle could not determine. It showed perception, and malice: yet it might have been no more than a gambol of his elephantine sense of fun. All things considered, she inclined towards malice, an intelligent wish to discredit and to wound. With one of those flashes of intuition which could be so disconcerting, the Captain had seen a weak spot in the armour of a man whom he disliked, and thrust in a shrewd hatpin. The only certainty was that he could not have foreseen the final effect of his jest.

It happened like this. One morning Mrs. Bracegirdle and Miss Balgannon received from Captain Higson yet another notice of presents on the way. To Miss Balgannon he said he was sending 'a bird'. She turned on Mrs. Bracegirdle her familiar look of incipient dismay.

'Whatever can he mean?' she asked. 'A chicken? A turkey? A goose? Oh, dear: it will never keep, on such a long journey, and in this hot weather.'

Mrs. Bracegirdle increased her uneasiness by suggesting sportively that it would be more probably a cassowary or a peacock. Her own presents were not particularised; but the Captain for the first time alluded in general terms to his circumstances, and to certain financial transactions which he claimed would much improve them. The implication would have been plain, even to Miss Balgannon, but Mrs. Bracegirdle was more interested in wondering about the presents. In her company, men often showed a disposition to ruminate hopefully on their finances, and she attached little importance to it.

A few days afterwards a van arrived from the station with a large parcel for Mrs. Bracegirdle, and, for Miss Balgannon, a parrot. The parrot was in a great cage of gilt wires, and the vanman, an obliging elderly individual in carpet slippers, declared it to be 'creatin' somethin' chronic', though, mercifully, in a foreign language. He went on to inquire where she would like it.

Repressing a desire to answer that she didn't want it

anywhere, Miss Balgannon breathlessly asked him to carry the cage. The parrot viewed them, in profile, out of one occasional table there. Mrs. Bracegirdle then tipped the vanman, and he withdrew.

Both ladies stood looking at the now silent occupant of the cage. The parrot viewed them, in profile, out of one eye.

'Polly,' Miss Balgannon said at last. 'Pretty Poll.'

She repeated this several times, finally eliciting from the bird a harsh and malignant croak. Mrs. Bracegirdle walked round to the far side of the cage.

'Look,' she said. 'There's a note. Tied on.'

'Is it for you?'

Miss Balgannon obviously had a faint hope that the parrot might not be hers after all.

'No, my dear.' Mrs. Bracegirdle was quite firm. 'It's addressed to you.'

Warily watching the parrot, she started to undo the knot. Her caution was justified, for the bird, after several seconds of attentive immobility, made a sudden savage swipe with its beak, and the widow jerked her fingers back just in time.

Unruffled by this near miss, the parrot regained the centre of its perch.

'Heave ho, my hearties,' it observed sepulchrally, and went into an evil trance.

Mrs. Bracegirdle returned with long scissors, and snipped off the missive, the parrot making no comment on this move. She handed the note to Miss Balgannon, who opened it as if it, too, might try to bite her. It proved to be strictly impersonal, containing only directions for the parrot's feeding and upkeep, and was not even signed.

Mrs. Bracegirdle's parcel contained another note, even more definite in tone than the last, in which the Captain expatiated on the loneliness of a seaman's lot, the absence of home comforts, and the kind of thoughts which—according to him—were most effective as a solace. For the Captain, it was a very personal letter indeed.

The parrot remained in a state of reserved hostility for the next three or four days. Miss Balgannon was terrified

of it, Mrs. Bracegirdle proposed withholding its meals till it learned better manners, and Lily, who very sensibly pointed out that to starve it was not likely to improve its temper, was left to feed and tend it.

Lily was not the least afraid. She approached the cage cheerfully, whistling and calling endearments, and the parrot, though it did not notably respond, made no attempt to hurt her, and at last took a piece of sugar from her fingers. After she had fed it and done out its cage four or five times, it consented to sit on her hand, and, when she put it back, it whistled to her as an afterthought.

Mrs. Bracegirdle disliked the parrot, a fact which it seemed to appreciate. As soon as she came into the room, it became silent, not so much watching as malevolently aware of her: an attitude which so offended the forthright and outspoken lady that at last, irritated out of her composure, she clapped her hands suddenly at the cage, and uttered an angry cry. The parrot fluttered in affright, then, recovering itself, screamed with ill temper. It would not be quiet till Lily flung a rug over the cage, when, after one ventriloquial protest, it was silent. After that, it hated the widow.

Within ten days, Lily was very fond of the parrot, and the parrot, as far as it was capable of affection, seemed fond of her. It sat on her shoulder, it whistled—sometimes—in order to earn a titbit, and though she appeared one morning with a bandage on her finger, and was forced to admit that the parrot had taken a nip out of her, she maintained that she had been teasing him and had only herself to blame; which neither Mrs. Bracegirdle nor Miss Balgannon would believe.

What none of the three could fathom was how the Captain could possibly have thought the parrot a suitable gift for Miss Balgannon. Why, of all things, a parrot? And this parrot? The answer was not revealed till the twelfth day after the parrot's arrival: and it gave a shock to all parties concerned.

The parrot was still very costive in the matter of speech. Lily claimed to have made it say a few things, in the privacy

of the kitchen; nautical expressions, for the most part, she said, blushing. It did not like Stan, at first sulking and then deafening them with its screeches, so that she had once more to put the rug over it. But not till the afternoon when Trevannion came to tea did the bird supply an answer to the question which had so puzzled the ladies.

The cage was on a table in the drawing-room window when Trevannion arrived, and Miss Balgannon showed him the bird. Trevannion gave it a careful inspection, in a manner that implied he was an expert.

'Very handsome. Very handsome indeed,' he proclaimed. 'Does he talk?'

'Well—not very much,' Miss Balgannon admitted. 'Lily says he has talked a bit for her, in the kitchen. Up here, he has only screamed, and said a foreign word or two.'

'H'm.' Trevannion stroked his moustache. 'Pretty Polly,' he said, in an excellent imitation of a parrot's voice: and the parrot, as if affronted, sidled away along its perch, and muttered to itself.

The door opened, and Mrs. Bracegirdle sailed in.

'How do you do, Mr. Trevannion?'

They shook hands. Mrs. Bracegirdle nodded towards the bird.

'He seems to have perked up all of a sudden. What have you been doing to him?'

Lily, who followed with the tea, gave her pet a solicitous glance. The name of Trevannion seemed to have an effect on him. Every time it was spoken, he cocked his head on one side, almost as if it meant something to him, as if he had heard it before.

'He seems to have taken quite a fancy to you, Mr. Trevannion!'

Trevannion laughed indulgently. Miss Balgannon began to pour the tea. He stood, at a courtly angle, waiting to take the cup from her and carry it to Mrs. Bracegirdle. He was well dressed, with a pair of smart sponge-bag trousers. The widow, viewing him as he came towards her, decided, reluctantly, that he was after all a fine figure of a man.

He handed her the cup, and brought the cake-stand. He

ministered to both ladies. Then, pulling up the knees of his trousers, he sat down, and told them the latest drollery about the little Wisharts.

He told it well, and the incident, trifling though it was, made Mrs. Bracegirdle laugh. She had a loud, shrill laugh. The parrot winced, recovered, and began to murmur excitedly to himself. In their amusement, the three of them did not notice him.

'Oh, Mr. Trevannion!' the widow's voice had a rich ring. 'Really! You've given me the hiccups.'

The parrot stood up stiffly. Then he edged along his perch; stopped; and stiffened again. There was silence. Trevannion, pleased with his success, bit into a small triangular jam sandwich.

Miss Balgannon leaned forward.

'Mr. Trevannion. Do you think——'

The question got no further, for the parrot suddenly jerked his head to one side.

'Trevannion!' he squawked. 'Trevannion! O-o-ho-ho!'—and burst into peal upon peal of devilish laughter. 'Trevannion!' he yelled. 'Tre-VAN-nion!' with such a violence of laughter, such a hellish roulade of guffaws, such screeches of maniacal derision, that any impulse the listeners had to laugh with him was beaten down into dismay.

They could not pretend—no one could pretend—that the parrot was only imitating Trevannion's name and Mrs. Bracegirdle's amusement. No: this was obviously a thing he had been taught, patiently, deliberately taught. What he had heard was simply the stimulus that set him off.

The effect upon Trevannion was shocking. His face had gone a dirty grey. He stared at the parrot, his mouth half open. Then, slowly, dark blotches rose on his neck and cheeks. His hands shook: he made an inarticulate, throaty sound, as if imploring the bird to stop. Even the widow was moved, and looked round for a means of silencing the parrot.

A moment later Lily rushed in, crimson, with the rug, and flung it over the cage. But the parrot was possessed by an ecstasy of energy. Wishing perhaps to atone for his

previous silence, he continued to call and cackle, with an effect as if the Witch of Endor were bidding Trevannion to a romp under the bedclothes. Then, quite suddenly, he stopped.

There was a short and painful silence.

'Well!' exclaimed Miss Balgannon faintly. '*Well!*'

Recovering herself, Mrs. Bracegirdle asked Trevannion to get her another cup of tea. She had to say it twice before he came to, and rose to take her cup. She talked energetically, trying to laugh away the parrot's outburst, and telling stories of other parrots she had known, and the solecisms committed by them. Miss Balgannon twittered agreement, and Trevannion, still pale and discomposed, was soon able to cap her stories with one of his own. But he was visibly shaken, and left earlier than usual.

His pride had received a double blow. He hated to be laughed at, even by a bird, and he was mortified by the discovery that he had not, as he supposed, charmed Captain Higson into friendliness. The naked ill will of the Captain, the intelligence that could invent such a trick—he was convinced that the Captain had deliberately taught the bird to deride his name; the fact that, of all insults, the Captain should choose this one, filled him with a dismay that approached panic. He saw, too, that he could never bring the insult home to the Captain. It was an unacknowledgeable taunt, a blow for which the striker could not be held accountable, which he could deny and laugh away, an injury the sufferer would only make a fool of himself by resenting. It was the perfect insult, the final expression of contempt: and at the knowledge that a man he had patronised as stupid saw through him and understood how to hurt him, Trevannion felt such rage that the street swam before him. He reeled, and nearly fell.

The ladies were left looking at each other. Miss Balgannon made one or two weak attempts to explain the thing away. An old friend of her father's, she said, could not have acted in such a fashion. Mrs. Bracegirdle clicked her tongue. Ellen's view that it was a dreadful thing to have done impelled her to defend the Captain. Soon her normal

lack of imagination came to her help, and putting away the memory of Trevannion's blotched and stricken face, she began to chuckle.

'I wouldn't have thought Bill had it in him,' she said. 'I'd never have believed he had the wits to think of a thing like that.'

Miss Balgannon looked at her, shocked. In that moment her mind closed for ever against the Captain: and a part of it closed against her dear May, who, not for the first time, was showing a vulgar streak. It would have been disloyal to admit this before. It was disloyal now. But to play such a wicked trick on poor Mr. Trevannion, who was always so courteous, so gentle, so—so *splendid*.

There! The word was out—though only in the silence of Miss Balgannon's heart. One result of his practical joke can hardly have been foreseen by the ingenious Captain Higson.

X

MRS. BRACEGIRDLE awoke to the gentle sound of the virginia creeper whispering against her bedroom window. A soft breeze came in through the open lattice, leaning against her, bringing to her the freshness of the early September morning.

Characteristically, she woke at once. She was not one to return gradually to consciousness, with bemused wonderings, left over from her dreams, as to who and where she was. Instantly aware that she was May Bracegirdle, lying in her comfortable bed at 'The Beeches', she pushed back the coarse black hair from her forehead, she stretched and yawned with the abandon of a plump and handsome cat. At no time was her adaptation to the world better shown than in her waking, unless it were in the promptitude with which she fell asleep.

Raising her head from the pillow, she saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. She sighed, yawned again, showing a pink palate and an almost perfect set of white teeth, with the glint of a gold stopping, then settled herself back voluptuously for two or three minutes before she was called.

Hardly had the last stroke from the neighbouring belfry of St. Asaph's loitered into the room when there came a gentle tap tap at the door. It caught Mrs. Bracegirdle in the middle of a further yawn, imparting to her slow 'Come in' a rich, smothered quality.

The door opened, and in came Lily, bearing a red lacquered tray with a cloth, two dish-covers, a brown earthenware pot of tea, and two kinds of preserve in small glass dishes.

'Good morning, Lily.'

Mrs. Bracegirdle smiled at her with lazy affection, and Lily returned the smile.

'Good morning, ma'am. The *Chronicle*, and one letter.'

Balancing the tray on one hand, Lily cleared away from the bedside-table three novels, nail-scissors, a file, a pot of

face cream, and put the tray in their place. Then she went to a chair and fetched from it Mrs. Bracegirdle's bed-jacket.

Mrs. Bracegirdle rose in the bed. It would be ungallant to say that she heaved herself up, and such a phrase would do less than justice to the smoothness of her movement. More than anything else, it resembled the emergence of a seal from the water. Showing an expanse of white and comfortable shoulder, which had afforded the late Nautical Assessor much consolation in his last years, the widow wriggled herself into the bed-jacket which Lily held for her. Once comfortably in, she clasped Lily's wrist.

'Come here, Lily.'

Obediently, Lily bent down. Mrs. Bracegirdle kissed her, at the same time reaching a hand under the pillow and producing a folded treasury note, which she pressed into the captive hand.

'Many happy returns of the day, Lily my dear. Here's a little present for you. And let me give you some news. You are to have the day off. Don't look so scared, child. It's arranged. Miss Balgannon knows all about it. I am going to take you away on an excursion. We will leave a cold lunch for her: she will be perfectly all right.'

Blushing, Lily thanked her, and, to cover her surprise and confusion, tidied up one or two things in the room before going out and closing the door. It had been Miss Balgannon's custom to celebrate as Lily's birthday the anniversary of the day on which the child came from the Institution to her service. Lily always had had a present, but it had been left to Mrs. Bracegirdle to think of treating her to a special outing; hence her surprise.

Alone again, Mrs. Bracegirdle tackled her breakfast. It was obvious, from the expertness with which she settled everything into the most comfortable position, that she knew very well how to take care of herself. She had imported her own feather mattress, with a feather pillow to match. Her night attire was of the frilly and seductive kind, and the bed was covered with a pale rose-pink eiderdown, also her own property, a source of continual admiration to Lily and her mistress.

Reaching down, Mrs. Bracegirdle drew up a rosewood bed-table, which fitted right across the bed, and slid her tray upon it. Removing the first of the small dish-covers, she revealed three inches of haddock, perfectly browned. This she consumed first of all, buttering a neat triangle of toast to eat with it. Then she poured herself out a cup of rich brown tea, of a potency she had learnt to enjoy during her married life. There was nothing anaemic about Mrs. Bracegirdle. She liked everything at full strength.

The newspaper lay on top of her letter, and she picked it up first. She did not even glance at the letter. Most other women would have attended to the letter before anything else, but Mrs. Bracegirdle, doubtless owing to her experience of life, invariably postponed the reading of letters until she was well fed and in a placid frame of mind.

The *Dycer's Bay Morning Chronicle* proclaimed, immediately beneath its title, its purpose to Educate, Elevate, and Enliven its readers. The local news, generally a strong point, did not seem on this fine morning to live up to the proclamation at the head of the sheet. At all events, it neither educated, elevated, nor enlivened Mrs. Bracegirdle. She looked languidly for life and colour.

'Painful incident at Wotley,' she read. 'Man's ear caught in mangle.'

Even this item, which she approached with faint curiosity as to how such a misadventure could have happened, failed to interest her. There was more local news on the back page. Had she the energy to turn on? She yawned, and uncovered the second dish. Bacon and kidney, beautifully cooked as always. Buttering some more toast, she finished her first cup of tea, poured out another, put in the cream, slowly and zestfully dropped in three lumps of sugar, and tackled the kidney and bacon. She took her time over this, and over the toast and preserves which made her last course. Then, delicately wiping her plump fingers with her napkin, she pulled out a small drawer of the bedside-table, and extracted from it an opulent morocco cigar case with silver fastenings. Her late husband, in the early days of their

marriage, had imparted to her his own liking for a good cigar.

Selecting a fine specimen, one of fifty lately sent her by Captain Higson, whose discovery of her partiality had raised her still higher in his esteem, she lit it, blew out a cloud of smoke, and lay back, her hands clasped behind her neck, contemplating the wall-paper.

The weeks of her sojourn at 'The Beeches' had not yet reconciled her to its design, nor given her a complete mental picture of its intricacies. Little given to speculation on matters that did not immediately affect her, she did not wonder at the state of mind of the artist who designed it, but endeavoured, sometimes with irritation, to make sense of the pattern. It was typical of her that, having discovered the design's power to irritate her, she reserved inspection of it until such time as physical well-being had made her impregnable.

The paper, which Miss Balgannon had inherited from the previous owner, had faded from what must have been a dark and viscous yellow. Its pattern, repeated fourteen times across the wall and six times down it, had as centre a tree vaguely resembling a Scotch Fir, supporting some dozen pieces of blue triangular foliage. The tree rested on the steep, Euclidian side of a mountain, at such an angle as to exhibit, beneath its left-hand branches, three bars of billowy cloud. On another mountain, facing the first, sat an animal, either a fox or a wolf, with its legs crossed, contemplating the tree. The whole scene was illumined by a crescent moon of enormous size, suspended just above the animal's head.

Mrs. Bracegirdle, luxuriously exhaling blue smoke from her well-shaped nostrils, contemplated this design for three or four minutes before once more picking up the *Chronicle*. The back page was no better than the front. Drama seemed to have passed by Dycer's Bay and its environs. The most exciting piece of local news was a church announcement, to the effect that the Reverend Septimus Dilgall, at the urgent desire of his vestry, had departed to Buxton on his annual holiday.

The notion of travel called up in the widow's mind the robust image of Captain Higson. The mariner now made no secret of his admiration. Each of his letters was less formal than the last, and contained sentences so pregnant with elephantine meaning that Mrs. Bracegirdle knew she must be ready for the question he would inevitably ask when he returned.

Smiling to herself, she surveyed his image in her mind. She smelt the clean aroma of soap and tobacco that came from him; she heard the stiff squeak of his boots, and the curious creakings, audible when he sighed or shifted his position, which her experience told her originated from his braces.

Then, idly and without curiosity, she reached out her hand for her letter. It was from the Captain.

Another woman might have read some meaning into this coincidence, or at least have been surprised and moved by it. To Mrs. Bracegirdle it was only natural that, thinking of her admirer, she should find a letter from him on her breakfast tray. Patting her pillow to make herself even more comfortable, she slit the envelope open with her thumb and began to read.

'Harbour Inn,
'Harwich.

'My Hearty,

'I have arrived here from Emden this morning. Since I last wrote you, I have completed a business deal and am forwarding £800 to my bank as a result. I have £3,575 11s. 8d. now, and draw £250 a year from Government stocks. I own five houses, two in Bournemouth and three in different parts of Kent, so my dear I may be said to be a comfortable man.

'You know my age, you know my tastes, you know in your big warm heart who I adore more than anyone on earth. I am coming to see you again in a few days, and will bring with me a box of Turkish figs, a hundred Mexican cigars, a stuffed snake, a Japanese bowl, and other things certain to delight you.

'I never thought at my age to feel such happiness as I

am now bursting with. With a fair wind and a following sea I hope to see you in seventy hours or so, when you will be asked a mighty important question by

‘Yours most affectionately and respectfully,
‘Bill (Captain)’

Mrs. Bracegirdle’s face had undergone several changes while she read. A look of calculation, as she considered the opening paragraph, was followed by a grimace at the list of gifts, a broad smile, and a giggle.

She put the letter on the eiderdown, lay back, and blew smoke at the ceiling. There was little doubt in her mind as to the answer Bill (Captain) would receive.

2

An hour and ten minutes later Mrs. Bracegirdle was dressed, and ready for the excursion. She called, with cheerful imperiousness, and Lily appeared at once.

The girl was wearing a new outfit, chosen this time by Mrs. Bracegirdle, who, while admitting that the clothes purchased by Miss Balgannon were ladylike and in good taste, declared that with her good looks Lily deserved something more colourful. This judgment was confirmed, for Lily in her new rig-out was really good to look at. She was not only pretty, but she had an air of quiet distinction, unmistakable but hard to define.

Miss Balgannon, summoned by the widow, joined in exclamations, and Lily accepted their praises with a modesty which was not all assumed. The fact was, Mrs. Bracegirdle made her feel embarrassed. She did not know quite why; she taxed herself with ingratitude for not being able wholly to respond to the widow’s kindness and partiality for her. There was a possibility, glanced at somewhere in the back of her mind, that she really would have preferred a gentleman lodger, however exacting, to a lady, however kind and considerate. But no matter. She put all these thoughts from her, as she stepped out into the sunshine with Mrs. Bracegirdle, and whole-heartedly prepared herself to enjoy the treat proposed, whatever it was.

The widow still kept up her air of mystery. Not till they reached the station, where Mrs. Bracegirdle took two first-class returns to Newton St. Bastable, had Lily any idea where they were going.

'I thought it a good idea,' Mrs. Bracegirdle told her, as they settled themselves into an empty smoking-compartment, 'to take you back to the town of your origin. I have some business I want to do there; and, while I am doing it, I thought it would be nice for you to go and have a look round at old haunts.'

Looking closely at the girl's face, she added, 'I know that some people might think this a funny idea, because, after all, it was not your home in the ordinary sense of the word. All the same, Miss Balgannon has told me that you have pleasant memories of the place; and since I have to go there anyway, I thought you might like to revive them. As for the unpleasant memories, if there are any—well, if you're at all like me, you'll enjoy the idea that you do not have to be there any more.'

It was a curious, rather formal speech. Mrs. Bracegirdle often found herself talking rather formally to Lily. Maybe the girl's slight air of constraint affected her without her realising it. To herself, the widow complained that Lily, though a dear child, lacked *go*. It was hard to know what was going on in her mind. Nothing, as like as not.

Lily replied to the suggestion with a murmur which Mrs. Bracegirdle took to be agreement. Inwardly, she was dismayed by the idea of going back. But, as the train started, and they puffed out on the little rickety line into the sunny countryside, her spirits rose, and she began to think that it would be fun to explore certain parts of the town again.

Dycer's Bay, with its windows and chimneys and little gardens, was soon left behind. A curve in the line gave them a backward glimpse of St. Asaph's spire, which always had a crude and naked look: then they were at the level crossing, with its white wooden gates, and Lily smiled to see the level crossing keeper's fat wife agitatedly shooing away some ducks which had waddled too near the track. There, too, held up at the gates, was the baker's cart, with his

melancholy piebald mare standing, her legs straddled out, looking at the train and tossing her gaunt head.

On they went, through pleasant meadows full of cows so busy grazing that they never raised their heads, over the new steel bridge, with a deafening clatter and clang, the engine whistling importantly to warn a row of railwaymen, who stood aside with their spades and crow-bars to let the train pass.

Lily was still completely unsophisticated, and could give herself up to the detail of the journey with all the absorption of a child. She noticed everything; rabbits running down a bank for their furry lives, fat cattle dealers arguing on the platform of the first station the train stopped at, so intently that two of them all but missed it; passing farmsteads, brooks, the rise and fall of the telegraph wires, and, when the train was halted in a cutting, a fat blackbird, perched on a bush, who dauntlessly sang it an *aubade*.

Mrs. Bracegirdle had brought some chocolates and fruit for the journey, but Lily was too happily occupied looking out of the window to do more than nibble. It took the train two hours and ten minutes to get to Newton St. Bastable, but to Lily it seemed a bare half-hour. She felt a qualm of fear as she stepped out on the platform, but the widow's cheerful authority soon banished this, and she prepared to enjoy herself here too.

Waving aside the three or four shabby taxi drivers who vociferously demanded her custom, Mrs. Bracegirdle hailed a decrepit landau, driven by a boy who seemed to be wearing his father's coat. She chose this vehicle because it was open, and, as she explained to Lily, it was too fine a day to be cooped up inside a taxi. Lily agreed, and, rattling and creaking along, they came to the hotel which the youthful driver recommended. It was called 'The Crown', but its sign exhibited a once golden lion, doing a kind of disgruntled caper above the door-way.

Early though it was, the two felt hungry after their journey, and Mrs. Bracegirdle decided it would be better to have lunch first. After that she would attend to her business, and Lily could explore.

The lunch was sumptuous and delightful, its only cloud being Lily's failure to enjoy the glass of stout which Mrs. Bracegirdle pressed upon her. Lily was very reluctant to try it, and, when at last she took a sip, she made such an involuntary grimace of disgust that the widow laughed heartily, and proceeded without inconvenience to drink Lily's share as well as her own.

Finishing off with a cigar, to the speechless scandal of an ancient waiter, Mrs. Bracegirdle at last rose, gave the waiter a tip so generous as to cause him still further struggle with his feelings, and went outside, where, by arrangement, the landau was waiting for her. She left Lily with instructions to be back at the hotel in two hours' time, waved her hand, and climbed in.

The boy on the box was sufficiently surprised to be driving a lady who smoked cigars. When he heard where he was to go, his surprise was greater still.

'Drive to the workhouse,' Mrs. Bracegirdle bade him.

The distance, a mile and a half, took quite a time to cover, but Mrs. Bracegirdle did not mind. She had leisure to finish her cigar and to admire the view, which, after the first half mile, was pleasant enough.

Arrived at the workhouse gates, she bade the boy wait her return, and, full of her determined mission, went in, inquired her way of several paupers who were sunning themselves on benches in the garden, and within five minutes was seated in the workhouse master's study. This gentleman, by name Mr. Roberts, proved to be mild-mannered, agreeable, and most helpful. He protested gently at first that Mrs. Bracegirdle's request was unorthodox, and that he had no authority to grant it. But Mrs. Bracegirdle was not easily put off, and before a quarter of an hour had gone by Mr. Roberts produced a vast book like a ledger, and, after much turning of the pages, informed her that the name of the young person in whom she was interested would appear to be Pipes.

'At all events,' Mr. Roberts said, looking at the widow over the tops of his spectacles, 'she was registered as the infant daughter of a Mrs. Matthew Pipes, residing here at

that time, and was left here by the said Mrs. Pipes in person.'

Thanking him prettily, and leaving a donation for whatever charitable purpose he might choose, Mrs. Bracegirdle re-entered the landau and made her way to the police station. Here she ascertained that no one of the name of Pipes was still living in the neighbourhood, and that Matthew Pipes, the supposed father of the child in question, had gone away before the child's birth and not been heard of since. An elderly constable, called into the office for consultation—it was wonderful how Mrs. Bracegirdle's mixture of charm and determination could loosen official taciturnity—admitted that there was a rumour to the effect that Mrs. Matthew Pipes had changed her name and migrated to London, where, it was believed, she had gone to the bad altogether.

Mrs. Bracegirdle thanked the officials in her best style, asked to be allowed to make a donation towards the forthcoming police sports, and re-entered her ancient vehicle with the grace of a queen. Feeling now on top of her form, she drove back to 'The Crown', and, bidding the boy come back in half an hour, she went in and found Lily waiting for her.

Lily's eyes were sparkling. Her early constraint had gone; she looked fresh, bright, and exceedingly pretty. She was excited by her ramble round the town, and at first could hardly be persuaded to eat any tea. Mrs. Bracegirdle had never heard her talk for so long at a stretch.

Lily said she could hardly remember the place at all. It seemed to her at first that she must have come to the wrong town altogether. She had shunned the workhouse end of the town, not because of any painful memories, nor because she was ashamed of having been there, but because she thought no one could possibly remember her, and any friends she had must either have gone away or have died.

'You never went to look at the workhouse, then?'

'No. Ought I to have?'

'Not if you didn't want to.'

Mrs. Bracegirdle saved her piece of news until they should

be in a less public place than the tea room. She and Lily ate a hearty tea, under the somewhat suspicious presidency of the waiter, who watched the widow narrowly to see if she proposed to finish this meal also with a cigar. It was evident that no tip, however generous, could rectify the shock such conduct had caused him.

Thirty-five minutes after her return, Mrs. Bracegirdle entered the landau for the last time, and she and Lily were driven to the station. Mrs. Bracegirdle gave the boy five shillings, bidding him at the same time beseech his father to get him a better fitting coat, or something at any rate which would look less silly. The boy received both tip and advice with a grin, and it was evident that he proposed to do nothing about the advice.

In the train, where they once more had a first-class compartment to themselves, Mrs. Bracegirdle revealed to Lily the business she had been at. Lily was overcome to find that interest in her welfare had prompted the whole expedition. The news of her parentage did not seem to be a shock to her. After all, thought the widow, watching her carefully for any sign of emotion, if you have never known your parents, it cannot greatly matter to you how they behaved. The only concern Lily showed was a distaste for her real name.

'Pipes,' she repeated, wrinkling her straight little nose, 'Lily Pipes. Will I have to call myself that?'

'I don't think so, my dear,' Mrs. Bracegirdle replied. 'I am not sure, if any legal business arose later on—if there was any property to which you were entitled, or anything of that kind. I suppose the name must appear on your birth certificate.' She sat up straight. 'Silly of me, I forgot to ask Mr. Roberts about that. Oh well, we can always write and find out.'

Lily sat silent, looking out of the window. It was some time before she spoke.

'Did the workhouse master say why my mother had to leave me?' she asked at last.

'No, my dear.'

Mrs. Bracegirdle revised her ideas on Lily's feelings. It

was evident that, unable to understand how a mother could abandon her baby girl, she was already seeking excuses for her.

'No, my dear,' she repeated. 'But I gather that your father deserted her, and so I expect she felt that you would be better off, better looked after, if she handed you over. I expect she had to earn her own living. Probably, too, there were debts to pay.'

Lily's face brightened.

'Yes,' she said, 'I am sure that must have been it.' Then the wistful look came over her face once more. 'It's a queer thing, to think that at any moment I might meet my mother in the street, and I wouldn't know her, and she wouldn't know me.'

A reply came to Mrs. Bracegirdle's lips, but she thought it better to keep silent.

3

Lily had a great deal to tell Miss Balgannon when they got back that evening: yet the first thing she said, when she and her mistress were alone together, had nothing at all to do with the excursion and the people encountered on it.

'Mrs. Bracegirdle told me that she would be leaving us at the end of next week. Did you know, ma'am?'

'Yes, Lily. She told me yesterday evening. I would have told you, only somehow I didn't get the chance.'

Lily looked at her with glowing eyes.

'That means we shall be able to have Mr. Trevannion.'

Up to that moment, Miss Balgannon had not been able to make up her mind. Now, looking into Lily's eyes, and seeing the quickened rise and fall of her breast, she gladly accepted what was to come.

'Yes, Lily.'

Lily drew a deep breath. 'Will you write and tell him, ma'am?'

'Yes, Lily. I will.'

There was a silence, as each of them contemplated the future. Lily spoke again.

'Just one thing, ma'am. The parrot.'

'Oh, yes. Yes, indeed.'

'I'll be sorry. He's getting quite tame. But——'

'You're quite right, Lily. He must go. We couldn't possibly risk anything like that again.'

'I know someone who will take him, ma'am. And be kind to him. I got Stan to make inquiries.'

'Yes.'

Both sighed with relief, that all was ready for the great change.

XI

ALTHOUGH Miss Jones had filled her post at 'The Peace' for a bare two months, Joe Blake was already aware of a substantial change in the house's fortune. Joe would have said, if challenged, that he knew his business well. He was experienced, he studied his customers, he got on well with the trade. He had no idea that anything to do with 'The Peace' lay open to improvement.

His new barmaid had opened his eyes. From the hour of her arrival, Miss Jones had made herself felt. Not that she was in any way pushing or aggressive: on the contrary, she was quiet and personally self-effacing. Yet she had sized things up in a matter of days, and on the evening when he gave her her first week's pay she had asked, modestly but with confidence, whether she might make a suggestion or two. On being told she might, she had indicated to Joe no fewer than three economies which, once they were put to him, his clear mind grasped at once.

The next thing—how it came about, or who suggested it, Joe could not afterwards recall—was the institution of a very pleasant practice whereby he and his barmaid took supper together after closing time. These meals, which Miss Jones made ready beforehand, were exceedingly pleasant, and profitable too. Over cold meats, or some tasty dish which a slow oven seemed always to have brought to the pitch of perfection, the pair of them would sit in an atmosphere of mutual respect and liking. Their conversation was strictly impersonal, and almost always concerned the business. Once he had realised her quality, Joe encouraged her to make any comment she thought fit on the conduct of the house. She did not abuse the invitation, as many women would. The points she raised were sound, and showed such knowledge of the business that Joe's respect for her rose and rose. He realised that he had found a treasure.

For Miss Jones had not, as the policeman's rumour had it, gone to the bad. With her looks and her luxurious

ambitions, she might well have done so. Instead, by one of those quirks which so perplex and delight the observer of human nature, she had developed an unexpected vein of industry and efficiency. It calls for the faculty of a dowser to tell what is latent in certain characters, until circumstance brings it out. Miss Jones, probably to her own surprise, found in herself a fierce capacity for work and an extreme shrewdness. These were perhaps her best defence in a world which was not notably kind to handsome girls obliged to make their own way: and, having so disastrously failed in her bid for the sofa and the chocolates, she may have resolved never again to be seduced by an illusion. So here she was, a mistress of her trade, and consequently very well able to look after herself. What motive had brought her to Dycer's Bay she may have confided to Mr. Antrim. Certainly nobody else knew; and Joe Blake, had the question been put to him, would have concerned himself no further than to hope that it would be enough to keep her there.

Such hope was vivid in his mind as he looked at her across the table. Sipping in a ladylike but efficient way at a glass of Hennessy's *Three Star*, enlivened with a dash of soda, Miss Jones appeared content with her surroundings. Women were inscrutable, however, as Joe well knew. You never could be sure what was in their minds. In fact, after the departure of a girl five years ago, who had made him a small fortune by serving teas in the summer months, seemed perfectly happy, and then, for no reason at all, tossed her head and gave in her notice, he had vowed not to have another woman in the place.

Joe eyed Miss Jones across the supper-table. He pondered her achievement: takings up, books in order, bar neat and shining, brewery's representative charmed and saying so, several new customers of the better class, these pleasant evening meals, and all brought about in a matter of weeks. He watched the tilt of her head, and the elegant lifting of her little finger as she drank. Better try to make sure of her. He cleared his throat, and spoke.

'Miss Jones. I'm after observing you, ever since ye came

here, and I'm obliged to tell ye I find ye a good girl, a very good girl indeed.'

Miss Jones, who at the word 'observing' had gone dead still, made a modest non-committal sound.

'I've considered the matter,' Joe continued, 'and I tell you what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to make you Manager-ess, and raise your wages thirty pound a year, with a bonus each Christmas accordin' to the takin's. How would that suit you?'

He sat back, breathing heavily. Miss Jones raised her eyes to his.

'What rate of bonus?' she inquired. 'What percentage?'

Joe struggled between dismay and pleasure at such a practical turn of mind.

'One and a half per cent for the first year. Two the second. Two and a half the third. After that, we'll review the position. Well?'

'Thank you, Mr. Blake. I'll think it over, and let you know in the morning.'

She got up from the table, deftly stacked the plates, put the glasses on them, and went out, brushing a firm yet soft thigh against Joe, who had risen also, and was holding open the door for her.

Joe stood for a good half-minute, rubbing his chin, his mind in some disorder.

2

Stan's training for his fight, which was now a bare three weeks distant, was a matter of great concern to all at 'The Peace'. Everyone, from Joe Blake to Trevannion, did something to help. The exacting schedule necessary to make a man fighting fit is not easily fulfilled when the man has a day's work to do as well, and, although his employer was very considerate, Stan found full training difficult.

The road work, five to seven miles of running, he managed by getting up very early in the morning. There was no one to run with him, but George Dubbidge turned out faithfully each day and made the pace for him on an ancient motor cycle. It was monotonous work, as there was only

the one road, and both were sick of it long before the fight. Stan came to hate the morning run, though he had to admit its value; and he often confessed afterwards that, but for George, who appeared punctually, blinking, cheerful, and inexorable, he would never have kept it up.

There was something almost inhuman in George's cheerfulness, and in the string of helpful platitudes he never failed to produce. Only his beaming kindness, and the fact that he was willingly depriving himself of an hour's sleep, kept Stan from snapping at him, as he shouted encouragingly over his shoulder above the fitful spitting of the motor cycle's engine. The thing that most annoyed Stan was to be told how good he would feel when he got in, and how much he would enjoy his breakfast: and as George never tired of this item of consolation, repeating it frequently in the course of each run, and beginning again the next day as enthusiastically as if he had never thought of it before, Stan's patience was tried to its limits.

'I must be gettin' nervy, like,' he confided to Walter. 'Generally I don't take no stock of George's sayin's and such like. But 'e's been gettin' me fair riled of a mornin'. 'Course, I don't let 'im see.'

Walter smiled dreamily.

'I enjoy George,' he said. 'There was a time he used to get on my nerves. Then I started to make a game of it. I started having bets with myself to see how many silly things I could get him to say. It was fun after that.'

'Half what old George says,' said Stan, wrinkling his brow, 'a bloke would be better not to say it at all. I mean, anyone can see it for theirselves. And when he keeps all on—well, it fair gives you the guts-ache. But I never use to mind, not till now.'

'Ah, he's a good-hearted chap, is George.'

''Course 'e is. And it's wonderful good of 'im to turn out and 'elp me. I know that. All the same, I wish 'e'd shut 'is trap sometimes.'

Trevannion, an unlikely helper, chose a most unlikely form of help. It was thought desirable by Stan's trainer and other experts that Stan's day should correspond as

nearly as possible to the day of the fight, and that he should have his main workout in the evening, near the time when the fight would take place. This was hard to arrange, since it clashed with the evening delivery. Stan's employers were ready to make what concessions they could, short of inconveniencing customers, and as they were doing a great deal already, he felt he dared not ask for anything more.

In this difficulty Trevannion came forward and volunteered to take over the evening delivery. Stan protested, shocked. It was far outside his notion of the fitness of things. But the more he protested, the more insistent Trevannion became. It was not only the sense of his magnanimity that pleased him; he foresaw that he would enjoy the round, and he pictured the surprise that would be felt.

Joe, Walter, and the others soon overruled Stan's objections; a youth was found who was willing to drive the van; and Trevannion set off with a flourish. For the eight days on which he officiated, he raised the homely transfer of meat to the status of a ceremony. Each call was a social visit, the handing over of joint, pork chops, pigs' feet, became a benediction; and, so well did Trevannion use the fresh contacts which the work brought him, that five new policies were taken out with the Dycer's Bay Widows' and Orphans' Assurance Society.

Joe Blake, as hardly needs saying, helped at every turn: and his efforts were most skilfully reinforced by Miss Jones. The new barmaid took the liveliest interest in the fight, and set herself to see that Stan had at least one solid and nourishing meal a day. She showed, too, a surprising knowledge of the right kind of food, and the general routine of training. Questioned admiringly by Joe, she admitted to having had to cater for an athlete at some earlier stage in her history; but she was inclined to be reticent on the subject. Joe respected her feelings, to the extent of passing on to his clientele a version which could allow no loophole for misunderstanding. The precaution was not needed. With the possible exceptions of Mr. Antrim and Trevannion, the regulars at 'The Peace' were of unsuspecting mind, and all

agreed in regarding this expert knowledge and solicitude, however learnt, as another of Miss Jones's virtues.

Walter did Stan his usual service of cheering him up, with the added special service of soothing his nerves, made sensitive by the ardours of training and the importance of the fight. Having no illusion about his dangerous opponent, in moments of discouragement Stan tended to recall disastrous fights which had ended in the first round. He saw himself shamed and broken, trying to mutter an apology to the disappointed crowds who were booing him, and, worse, having to face the silent sympathy of his friends and backers in Dycer's Bay.

Walter, who knew such fantasies all too well, rallied and laughed at him with a confidence he could not feel. So well did Stan manage to convey his fears, that Walter more than once began to sweat with the intuitive's ready response to suggestion. Stan in his misery had no idea of the strain to which he was putting his friend and comforter; but Walter, from his very participation in the pangs, was able to say the right thing and watch the furrows disappear from Stan's shining brow as he sighed, relaxed, and said once more, with a shamefaced grin, 'Well: it'll be all the same in a 'undred years time': a proverb learned, not from George Dubbidge, but from that much respected man his uncle.

The Mountaineer also expressed an interest in the proceedings to the extent of nightly attendance, and even asking a question or two. As a rule he came not more than twice a week; and this assiduity, surprising in view of his previous strictures on prize-fighting, very much gratified Stan and his retinue, until they observed that almost all of the Mountaineer's attention seemed to be focused on Miss Jones. Miss Jones spent most of her time in the main bar, only looking in on the select to see if the company had all they wanted. The Mountaineer's partiality for her became evident from the way in which he sat watching the door, from his rapt gaze when she came in, from his rising to hold the door open as she went out, and, finally, to their scandal, from a disposition to forsake the regulars and lurk in the

public bar. Up to that point he had seemed as unselfconscious as always: but, when Walter spotted him in a corner of the bar, he quailed—for all the world like a dog that's done wrong' as Walter told the others—and suffered himself to be fished out and escorted to his proper place, in a state of some embarrassment.

'I—ah—I was expecting a friend,' he told them. 'I waited on the mere possibility, the off-chance. But it is all right. He will not come now.'

And, after a perfunctory, almost ingratiating question or two to Stan, he fell back into his dream, and sat watching the door, for the moment when Miss Jones should look in.

This development amused the regulars, and caused them some concern; but the impending fight was looming larger and larger in their minds, and they had no time to waste over the eccentricities of Mr. Horace Watteau.

3

Trevannion smiled largely on Mr. Antrim.

'This is the last occasion, Teddie, on which I shall entertain you in this hell-hole.'

'I know,' Mr. Antrim replied. 'You are moving into 'The Beeches' on Tuesday.'

Trevannion raised his brows. 'Your intelligence service is working well.'

'It's working even better than you might suppose.' There was a tinge of sourness in Mr. Antrim's tone. 'You never told me you squared old Hopkins. For every person he passed as a first-class life.'

Trevannion's face did not change.

'The emolument offered by the Company is not generous. A practitioner in late middle age, contemplating retirement, one's sympathies are moved, Teddie. One's bowels of compassion. One naturally wishes to do all one can in such a case.'

'Naturally,' Mr. Antrim sneered. For the first time, he appeared to be out of temper.

'The more so,' Trevannion went on smoothly, 'when

knows he has been unfortunate with certain speculations. Certain investments in local property.'

'Oh. That's how you've got him, is it.'

'I could not help feeling a little to blame in the matter. So, naturally, I was anxious to do all I could to help.'

'You know'—Mr. Antrim contemplated him judiciously—'you're not such a mug as I thought you were.'

'Handsome of you, Teddie. Handsome. I was about to add, when you broke in with your charming tribute, that the investments which turned out so unfortunately were of the most reputable character. So reputable, that even the Reverend Mr. Dilgall, of St. Asaph's, was attracted by them.'

Mr. Antrim gave a reluctant titter.

'I have to hand it to you, Trev. You operate on a larger scale than I guessed. Yes: pretty work. Luring respectable citizens into shady property deals, drawing a fat commission on the investment, and getting them further in your power when they lose their money. Very pretty. Very pretty indeed.'

Trevannion was gratified.

'I am happy in your approval, Teddie. You see now why I remain in Dycer's Bay. Why I have tolerated this wretched hovel.'

'I do indeed. And I apologise for the many short-sighted criticisms I made. Most impertinent of me. Most ill advised.'

'Not at all. You were not to know.'

'All the same, it was impertinent of me. A serious error of judgment.' Mr. Antrim shook his head, in sorrowful wonder at his own fallibility. 'But, Trev—returning to old skins. Surely it wasn't necessary to square him every day? Wasn't there a single first-class life on the list? Included just as a precaution?'

'My dear Teddie, there have been quite a number that would be passed by any doctor in the kingdom. First-class lives, by the most exacting standards.'

'In that case, why grease the old boy's paw for living so?'

'Do I understand you to suggest, Teddie, that I should stoop to common bribery? That I should pay the excellent Dr. Hopkins to issue false reports? No, no. He would not do it. At least, he might not. Whereas, if I offered him a fee for each proponent, regardless of physical condition, thereby making it clear to him that my only motive is a natural indignation at the paltry fee paid by the Company—well, it works better that way.'

'I see,' said Mr. Antrim.

'But tell me, Teddie—just to satisfy my curiosity—how exactly did your intelligence service unearth the fact of my little agreement with the good Doctor?'

'Wouldn't you like to know.'

'Very much, Teddie, very much indeed, I confess.'

'It's a ve-ry good intelligence service. You know, Trev, if I've been under-rating you, I fancy you've been under-rating me. What do you suppose I've been doing all this time? Do you think a man of my—how shall I say—'

'Experience.'

'Thank you—of my experience could be in a nest of twisters like this without getting wise to a few things?'

'A nest of twisters. Our municipal authorities would wince under your righteous indignation.'

'They'll do more than wince before I've finished with them,' Mr. Antrim declared. 'I've got a very good intelligence service. Very useful indeed.'

'Catholic in its range, apparently.'

'Yes. It's done something else for me, too. Turned up a real titbit. Only yesterday.'

'To wit.'

'I think'—Mr. Antrim dropped his voice to a whisper—'I *think* I have located the gentleman from Newton St. Bastable I told you about a short time ago.'

'The one who scuppered his parents and ditched his wife?'

'Matthew Pipes, Esquire.'

Trevannion whistled. 'The hell you have! where is he, if I may ask?'

'Here. In Dycer's Bay.'

'Good lord. What's he come for?'

'As you may imagine, that question is exercising my mind. Very seriously.'

'Is he after his wife, do you suppose?'

'It is more than possible.'

'What would he want of her?'

Mr. Antrim spread out his hands.

'We must not forget that I have only her account of the whole affair. I believe it to be substantially accurate. But there is always the possibility that she retained more than she pretended.'

'Diddled you, in fact?'

Mr. Antrim shook his head.

'If there were any diddling—' he said, and did not complete the sentence. 'Not that she had any money. Our arrangement had a speculative flavour.'

'I'll bet it had. Well, Teddie: I need hardly warn you to be careful. Whatever your arrangement with her was, it is hardly likely to endear you to Mr. Pipes. And Mr. Pipes is not a man to cross. He will not be deterred by any academic scruple about the sacredness of human life.'

Mr. Antrim smiled. 'I am not afraid of Mr. Pipes,' he said. 'In fact, the number of persons who offer violence is far smaller than you would think. I have only encountered it once.'

'Did you enjoy it?'

'No. I can't say I did. But the other party was very sorry afterwards. Exceedingly sorry.'

'Very right and proper. Even so, Mr. Pipes's sorrow mightn't do you much good. If, for example, you weren't alive to feel it.'

'I shall be careful,' Mr. Antrim said. 'You need have no anxiety on my account. All the same, Trev, there is something I'd be very grateful if you'd do for me.'

'Inform your nearest and dearest, afterwards?'

Mr. Antrim's rather forced smile deprecated such facetiousness.

'That will not arise.' He slid his hand into some deep inside pocket, and fished out a large brown envelope, tied

with string and sealed. 'I would be more than grateful if you could keep this safe for me.'

Trevannion looked at it with distaste.

'Why don't you put it in the bank?'

'I would sooner entrust it to you.'

The two men looked at each other in silence for several seconds.

'You needn't be suspicious,' Mr. Antrim said at last. 'It can't implicate or involve you in any way.'

'So you tell me, Teddie. I confess, though, I'd feel happier on that point if I knew what it was.'

'It contains something which, if my lodging were searched, in my absence, the searcher might be anxious to find.'

'Several searchers, I should imagine,' Trevannion glanced again at the package.

'Maybe. Will you keep it for me?'

'And admit the searchers here?'

'Why should they come here? Why should they suppose I would confide it to you, of all people? I don't mean that offensively, Trev.'

'I know perfectly well how you mean it. I am under no illusion as to the sort of things you have been letting drop about your supposed investigations here. You will have suggested that my insurance business is crooked, and that you are looking into it. You are not the only one with an intelligence service, Teddie.'

Mr. Antrim smiled craftily. He was not at all disconcerted.

'Well— Isn't it better so? It would hardly do if I allowed it to be thought we were in collaboration.'

Trevannion's eyes were half shut.

'Are we, Teddie?'

'I trust so, Trev. I base all my practice on the belief. That is why I have been at some pains to disguise the fact. Come, you cannot complain of that. And with regard to this envelope, it is an additional safeguard. Wherever they look, they won't look here. Still less in your new abode.' He giggled. 'You can hide it in the old girl's bedroom.'

'You have an unpleasant mind, Teddie. Really unpleasant.'

'I would call it realistic.' He paused, and rubbed the end of his nose. 'It grieves me, Trev, that you seem to have such a poor opinion of me.'

'I think,' said Trevannion, surveying him judicially, 'that you would sell your grandmother for her weight in tripe.'

Mr. Antrim gave a surprised little squeal of laughter.

'My grandmother was a most unappetising old lady. Remarkably skinny, too. She'd have fetched very little. And I do not care for tripe.' He beamed on Trevannion. 'You will do me this favour, then, and keep the packet, in spite of your poor opinion of me?'

'I will, Teddie.' Trevannion rose and sighed. 'I'll put it in here.'

He took it with a grimace, and, holding it as if it were dirty, unlocked a drawer in his secretary and put the envelope in.

'There, Teddie. That's the best I can do for you.'

'Thank you, Trev. That's really good of you. I appreciate it.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'Tell me—this is in no sense a criticism: but just as a matter of interest—in view of Mr. Dilgall and others; why the slight air of moral indignation? Of disgust? I ask merely as a student of human nature.'

'A foible,' Trevannion told him easily. 'We all draw the line somewhere. Call it a physical reaction, if you like. A sort of stomachic intolerance, Teddie. Pay no heed to it.'

Mr. Antrim grinned. 'I shan't,' he said.

XII

TREVANNION'S arrival at 'The Beeches' was made the occasion for a small ceremony. To her own surprise, Miss Balgannon felt less excited about it, now that it was certain, than she had in the days when it was a possibility only. A kind of emotional numbness had settled on her. She took leave, a little tremulously, of Mrs. Bracegirdle, sorry to lose support, but, again to her own surprise, finding herself relieved when the opulent, voluble, and scented visitor was no longer in the house. All at once, on the Saturday morning, 'The Beeches' seemed to be itself again. Miss Balgannon had never thought of dear May's tenancy as an intrusion, as something foreign to the genius of the place, yet that was what it appeared to be now that she was gone.

Lily, cleaning out the widow's bedroom, sweeping from the floor the small spillings of powder, and emptying the waste paper basket of pieces of tinted cotton-wool, felt, even more decisively, that the house was rid of an incubus. A corner of her mind took her to task for ingratitude. Mrs. Bracegirdle had been very good to her; but she shook off the accusation. Mrs. Bracegirdle might be as good and as kind as she pleased, but she did not belong in 'The Beeches'. And when Miss Balgannon, to ease her own sense of guilt, faltered out something about missing their late guest, Lily answered robustly that it had been very nice to have Mrs. Bracegirdle for a short visit, but that she did not suit the household any more than it suited her, and it was a good thing that she had left. Saying that to her mistress got rid of the last of her own scruples, and she went about the house singing to herself, feeling strong-minded and slightly fierce. She made use of this feeling to scold Stan when he came to tea in the kitchen; but Stan seemed for once to understand, and was inclined to grin at her sheepishly, instead of looking anxious and concerned, as she had hoped.

Stan's physical condition was now so fine that it dominated him. Except when he was having an attack of

nervousness about the fight, he was almost invulnerable, so well did he feel; and the indignant Lily could make no real impression on him. She became so severe in the course of her efforts that contrition attacked her after he had gone, and grew almost to panic in case she might have made him so miserable that he would lose the fight. But she got a glimpse of him on Sunday morning, on the way to St. Asaph's, and the grin he gave her was reassuring—and slightly irritating. Lily's emotions were in an unstable condition. The reason, on which she dared not allow her mind to dwell, so ardently did she look forward to it, was the coming of Trevannion.

Cleaning out the room after Mrs. Bracegirdle, she had averted her mind from thoughts of its next occupant. Not until Monday, the day before he was due, did she consciously set about preparing for Trevannion. The careful corner of her mind signalled alarm that his coming should mean so much, but all the rest rushed forward and abandoned itself blissfully to the flood of delight. Now he would be here, now she would have him to look after—and how she would look after him! Already her thoughts were busy in a passion of service. Here at last was what she wanted, what she needed; to spend herself in the service of a man. Stan she looked on as a boy. He called to her protective instinct, she was fond of him in a quiet, sisterly way. Trevannion was grand, mature, mysterious, lordly, manhood itself; and, miracle of miracles, he was kind to her, kind and fatherly. His voice, the very sound of which made her shiver and tingle from head to foot, said kind things to her. She would have worshipped him if he had never spoken to her at all. That he should be kind, that he should smile at her and take her hand and ask her how she was, that he should notice what she had on, and even on occasion wink at her in silent conspiracy: these things roused in her a passion of gratitude that became sheer adoration. The child who had had neither a mother's nor a father's love was ready with the whole strength of her character to devote herself to the sixty-year-old man who had been carelessly kind to her.

When the Tuesday came, Lily's excitement would not leave her still for a moment. Her eyes were bright, the palms of her hands sweated, little smiles came irresistibly to her lips. Then all her happiness collapsed and she felt hollow with fear and foreboding. Her excitement infected Miss Balgannon: neither of them could eat any lunch. By three o'clock, Lily had recovered her spirits, and was floating on a tide of inward certainty and delight. All her alarms had passed to Miss Balgannon, who wished wretchedly she had never agreed to take Trevannion, and missed the support of her dear May.

She pattered into Trevannion's bedroom, and stood in amazement. The room was decked with no fewer than five vases full of flowers, and, spread across the bed, was a crimson banner with the legend *A HUNDRED THOUSAND WELCOMES*, in Gaelic and English, which she recognised as having been brought back by her father, many years ago, after a holiday at Oban. It had been packed away at the bottom of an ottoman in the boxroom.

Looking at these signs of care and naïve affection, Miss Balgannon's eyes filled with tears. She had felt like that, long years ago, she had poured out loving solicitude on an uncle who was kind to her, kind in an understanding way: who did not say much, but went for walks with her and held her hand; who admitted her to his silent company, just let her be with him, but whose apparent unconcern was worth more to her than the solicitude of all the rest. Reliving that past pain, feeling her childhood once more about her, she who as a rule kept nothing but its fears and insecurity felt warm and at peace. Dear little Lily, doing all she could in her childish way to make the newcomer welcome. Setting an example to her, too, who had selfishly been thinking only of herself. How would Mr. Trevannion feel, coming for the first time into a new home! It should be a home to him, yes indeed, Lily was right, they must do all they could to make him happy and comfortable. Between them, they would do it.

Joined to her indulgent love for Lily, this memory of her childhood made Miss Balgannon feel more determined,

more nearly grown up than she had ever felt before. Dear Lily!

These feelings did Miss Balgannon a deal of good, and comforted her: but in one respect they were wide of the mark. Lily's feelings may have been naïvely expressed, but they were far more adult. The girl who stood behind her mistress to welcome Trevannion had said good-bye to childhood.

Trevannion was no less anxious to make a ceremony of his arrival. He had prepared an inaugural speech which should emphasise the importance of the occasion, and he planned to arrive soon after his effects, which Boocock, the local carrier, was to bring round on a large hand-cart. The carrier, however, had stopped for refreshment, and Trevannion, entering the gate, found himself in the middle of a homely and slightly ridiculous scene.

On the door-step stood Miss Balgannon, watching in some anxiety the preparations made by the carrier and a youth whom he had enrolled as temporary assistant to get Trevannion's heavy mahogany secretary off the hand-cart. The method favoured was, apparently, to tip the cart until the secretary slid off, and attempt to catch it before it damaged itself on the gravel path. Lily, darting down the steps, broke into lively criticism of this plan, and was proposing an alternative, when Trevannion himself strode forward to add a weightier remonstrance.

Seeing Trevannion, Lily ran in again and took her place behind Miss Balgannon. Trevannion removed his hat with a flourish, looked for somewhere to put it, and hung it on a bush. Then, commanding the assistant to take the other side, he grasped his cherished secretary, Boocock slowly tilted the cart, and between them they eased it to the ground.

There was a pause. Trevannion would have liked to carry straight on and supervise its transport to his room. But there, expectant, in prearranged welcome, stood Miss Balgannon and Lily. They looked so artless, so childish, that Trevannion forgot all his mental rehearsals. He bounded forward like a boy, and took both Miss Balgannon's hands in his.

'My dear Miss Balgannon! And Lily!' He let go one hand of his hostess, and reached for Lily's. 'How charming of you! How kind! This is a real welcome.'

It was unfeigned. His heart glowed, his eyes shone. For the moment, he felt exactly as he spoke. The effect on the two women was such that neither could speak at all.

'Excuse me a second.'

He left them, and returned to the carrier and his mate. Lily ran too, and proved surprisingly useful in helping to move the secretary into its place. She was quick-witted, Trevannion noted approvingly. She was able to think in terms of movement. She saw how things could be done. She judged distances.

The job was finished, the carrier and his assistant dismissed with tip and grandiloquent phrase, and Trevannion came in, dusting his hands. Lily faced him, her eyes dancing.

'I've put some hot water in your room,' she said.

'That's kind of you. But I won't give you the trouble of emptying basins for me, Lily. I'll use the bathroom.'

Lily looked at him. For an instant he thought she was going to stamp her foot.

'I've put it there specially,' she told him; but there was no pleading in her tone. It enjoined that, on this first ceremonial occasion, he would kindly do as he was told. Then, before he could reply, with the pathetic vulnerability of the young, her expression changed, and a look of impending disappointment came into her eyes.

Trevannion laughed.

'This is a special occasion,' he said. 'I see I must do as I'm told. For this once, mind you. I make no promises for the future.'

Relieved and happy, she smiled back at him. Only afterwards did it occur to her that he had read her mind, and she wondered at him, in an ever-recurring amazement.

Trevannion, going into the bedroom, found a heavy polished brass can in the flowered basin, covered by a thick huckaback towel. There were flowers everywhere, on the chest of drawers, on the mantelpiece, on the table. He checked at sight of the banner spread across his bed, and to

his utter astonishment tears came into his eyes. This so startled him that he dared not even comment on it to himself. The only defence was to pretend that such feeling was natural and accustomed.

He brushed the tears away, looked around, sniffed the flowers and, as he poured out the hot water, caught the smell of cooking. He drew a deep breath. Here was a welcome indeed. From this day on, he would be in clover. As he washed, he began to whistle in spontaneous happiness. Then, remembering the women, he changed to a rich but self-conscious baritone.

Now that Trevannion was in the house, Lily was transformed. Her colour improved, her eyes sparkled, she sang about her work, and looked so pretty that even Miss Bagganonn remarked it. Towards the cause of this transformation her manner varied from an awed deference to an almost peremptory familiarity. She scolded him when he was late, she fussed over his food. She even dared to ask him what he was doing and where he had been: and the vain delighted man expanded and glowed, replying to her with a mixture of banter, warmth, and a candour which often surprised him, but which Lily appeared to take for granted. Both were lifted to a behaviour they could not have foreseen: something was added to each: and if the effect was greater on the young and swiftly growing girl, the sixty-year-old man knew a real change too. A side of him that had had little play since he was young came to life and flourished under the kind and cosy and spinsterly roof of 'The Beeches'.

Lily spent hours tending his belongings, sewing buttons on his clothes, trimming the frayed ends of his trousers, and polishing his boots till they shone like enormous beetles. She had someone to look after now, someone she could adore as she had never been able to adore Mr. Murrough, someone of whom she was not afraid.

Biting his knuckles, Walter stared at the empty ring. The shouting and uproar which had greeted the premature end

of the last bout died down to a general noise, roaring dully in the cars like the noise in a shell, and pierced with sharp vertical stabs of articulate sound, the voices of men by the ringside offering odds on the next fight.

'Seven to three Woodlock! I — gave seven to three.'

Walter made a face.

'It must be hell for them in there, waiting. Not knowing when they'll be called. No idea whether the fights before them are going the distance or no.'

Trevannion answered casually, to hide the fact that his heart was bumping.

'That one certainly didn't go the distance. Second round, was it, or third?'

'Second. It's taken 'em by surprise. They're not ready.'

'Better than waiting half an hour, all tensed up.'

'Ah, but——'

He broke off, as a rise in the volume of the voices announced the appearance of the next couple.

Stan came first, his arms crossed over his chest, a shabby dressing-gown hanging from his shoulders. The Dyer's Bay contingent broke into loud cries of encouragement. One or two tried to pat him on the back as he walked down the narrow gangway. A second held the ropes apart, and Stan ducked between them and crossed the ring to his corner. The glare of the lights showed that his normally shining face was shining brighter than ever under its coat of vaseline. Despite the glare, it was for once impossible to read his expression. Even Walter, who knew him so well, could make nothing of its impassivity.

The Dyer's Bay people put up such a valiant outcry that they inspired the rest of the audience to a tolerant applause. Give the boy a break, they thought indulgently: he's taken on something, all right. Ted, who stood beside Stan with his two seconds, said something, and Stan obediently stepped out to the centre of the ring, and with two or three little awkward, ducking bows, acknowledged the applause.

Then came a far louder, more sustained welcome, as young Woodlock and his assistants came down the aisle. Woodlock, pale, composed, made his entry with a practised

assurance that struck chill to the hearts of Stan's supporters. Every movement, the swift, easy contortion with which he came through the ropes, the faint, half-contemptuous grin on his face as he held aloft his bandaged hands, spoke eloquently of a long experience.

Trevannion moistened his lips. This was going to be a massacre. He was surprised to find his heart beating faster and his mouth dry. He would have said he did not care much about Stan, that he was detached from all of them, that, like Malvolio, he was not of their element. Yet here he was, concerned, nervously hoping that Stan would make some sort of a show. He rallied himself inwardly on this recurrence of a softness long outgrown. Was it not really egotism, a hope that nothing with which he, Trevannion, was even remotely connected should suffer disgrace? The notion comforted him, as he turned to Walter.

'We're all here in force, aren't we?'

'All except Mount.'

'I thought he was coming. I heard him talking about it.'

'I reckon he's stayed behind to have a go at the barmaid. He'll have the field to himself.'

Trevannion shrugged, and turned his attention to the ring. Young Woodlock was crossing to Stan's corner. With his crooked, mechanical smile, he shook Stan's hand.

'Stan, old boy. Goo' luck.'

'Harry——'

Stan could get out no more than the name and a quick, wounded grin that was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

Then came the ritual of putting on the gloves. Woodlock's manager came across to watch Stan's fists being encased, and Ted, doing his best to pretend that this was all in the day's work, went over to inspect the same operation in the other corner. Each appeared satisfied.

After an inquiring glance, to know if all was ready, the M.C. ducked under the ropes and took the centre of the ring.

'Lay-deezzz and—gentlemenn.' The volume was sufficient to fill three such halls. 'This is a ten-raound contest, three minutes each raound, between'—he paused dramatically

and pointed—'on my left-uh, Stann-uh Gummick-uh, of-uh Dycer's Bay'—he broke off for the applause, while Stan acknowledged unhappily—'on my right-uh, Young-u Woodlock-uh, of-uh Manchester.'

A great roar arose, and Woodlock, suddenly looking more sprightly, received it with a number of small contortions.

'Gummick—Woodlock.'

He made to leave the ring, then added, as an afterthought, 'Referee—Mister George-uh ROGERS.'

He disappeared, and the referee, a small, stocky man, came forward and beckoned the boxers to conference. Dressing-gowns over shoulders, they went into a huddle with him in the middle of the ring, accompanied each by his chief supporter. Ted kept a hand on Stan's shoulder: Woodlock's manager stood beside him. Stan's gloves were crossed on his breast, as if to hold his dressing-gown in place. Woodlock's hung loose at his side.

The referee said his say in tones so low they did not reach even to the ringside. At the end, he asked each in turn if they understood, and both nodded.

'Right. Shake hands now, and come out fighting.'

They shook hands, Woodlock giving Stan his flicker of a smile—it was, Trevannion decided, like the flicker of a lizard's tongue—and Stan replying with a stiff convulsion of his facial muscles. Then, in relief, they turned their backs and stood, each in his corner, rubbing their shins in the resin. Woodlock's shorts, made of some shimmery material like silk, bore his initials embroidered in large green letters.

Ted stood by, tense, anxious, ready to twitch the dressing-gown from Stan's shoulders. Looking at him, he encountered a glance of pure misery, the appeal of a small boy just about to blubber.

All the trainer's goodness of heart, his woman's tenderness, flashed into his face.

'Good boy, Stan. Show 'em all you know.'

Stan's look of appeal held for a second. Then it was wiped away, and the face slipped into a dead, still resolution.

'Seconds out. Time!'

The gong banged, and before its reverberations had died down the two fighters were in the middle of the ring.

Stan had no plan of campaign. His mind blank, he found himself attacking. His movements were light, fast, and easy. Woodlock, his chin low on his left shoulder, boxed carefully, masking his care by the speed with which he moved. He did not expect any trouble: but hard experience had schooled him not to expect anything, only to deal with things as they turned up. For the moment, he risked nothing, treating Stan's straightforward attack with a respect that flattered it.

Before twenty seconds had gone by, Stan knew that he was up against something of a class he had never met before. The realisation had a curious effect. It steadied him. It took away hope, and gave him calculation. There was only one thing a bloke could do, in such a case—pull out the very best he had. In the clarity which settled on his mind, the clarity of despair, he remembered everything he had ever been taught. All Ted's teaching lay there in front of him, for all the world as if he had copied it all out and put it on a table. What was more, he was fit and strong, in perfect shape to make use of it.

All right, then, he said in his mind. Come on, Stan boy. Give 'em a go.

The downright part of Stan was encouraged to a harder attack, but the older, knowledgeable Stan intervened. He was making no sort of impression on Harry. Play light, Stan said cock. Box clever.

Woodlock moved fast and economically, blocking, smothering, slipping Stan's blows, attempting hardly anything in return. The mind behind his small, deep-set eyes was working at its accustomed dispassionate speed. It was right what they told him. A strong, willing boy, who could box a bit if you let him get set. It was going to be an easy ride. The bloke had a punch, so they said. No sign of it yet, anyway. Still, best be careful. Besides, he had orders.

He gave Stan a clip or two in the ribs, just to show that there was no ill feeling, and then, feeling that the end of the round was near, manoeuvred round towards his corner.

This offered no difficulty. Experimentally, well covered against a counter, he let loose a quick, left hook. Stan ducked, and took it high on the side of his head: and Woodlock added one more to the series of mental notes he had been making.

Then the gong went, and Woodlock, two feet from his corner, had sat down almost before Stan realised, and turned to cross the width of the ring to his own.

Discreet applause came from the house. Stan, sitting upright and watching the flapping towel, had one bewildered thought only. The first round was over, and he was still all right. That was one nightmare gone, anyway. He hadn't been knocked out in the first round. A galaxy of illustrious faces looked at him, with sorrowful, reluctant approval, the great ones who had suffered this tragic humiliation: and the last weakness in Stan's mind was removed. Now this fear had been lifted, he could do his damndest. Joy rose in him, raising his despair to the level of an ecstasy. It's all right, he thought, I don't care what happens now.

Ted's voice broke in on his thoughts. It had been going on since he sat down, but he hadn't heard a syllable.

—'too clever for you to try any rushing tactics. Box 'im. Use your left. You done well, very well. Box 'im, like if you was in the gym.'

Stan nodded, with the inward resolve to go one better. He'd box as he'd never boxed before. Then the gong boomed, and they were once more in the centre of the ring.

Woodlock, confident now, began to test his man. Slipping Stan's first rush, he made full use of an abnormally long reach, keeping Stan off with left leads that seemed to dart like the head of a snake, and sending Stan's head back twice in succession with punches that were stiff but had not the full weight of the body behind them. Then, having learned what he wanted, and mindful still of orders to give the local boy a show, so that the fight should not seem a put-up job, he stepped away and once more allowed Stan to do the leading.

There is in all games a type of good player who makes his opponent play above his usual form. Woodlock, a clever

boxer, took a line that called for all Stan knew, setting a pace which Stan could not live up to, but to which he responded with credit. A scrapper would have been helpless against it, his crude aggression shown up. If he were a good scrapper, Woodlock for his own safety must have annihilated him. But Stan had been taught some boxing. He showed to real advantage, and was not dangerous. Boxing in a way that made Ted open his eyes, Stan stood up to his opponent fearlessly, and, when Woodlock at will turned once more to the offensive, blocked and ducked and countered with a spirit that brought a round of real applause when the gong sounded.

Breathing hard, his face shining, Stan sat up in his corner. His feeling of despair had gone, and a kind of amazed hope took its place. Two rounds! he had gone two rounds with young Woodlock, and, if points were given for leading, he was ahead. On any reckoning, there couldn't be much in it. Harry was clever, there was no doubt about that: but—boxing him was just like boxing in the gym.

Ted, who saw the change of mood, strove cautiously to warn Stan. Ted was not deceived. He knew perfectly well that Woodlock was playing, and that Stan had not an earthly chance with him. It was only a question of how soon Woodlock chose to open up, and then—— Looking across the ring, and noting a lip-twisted aside of Woodlock to his manager, Ted guessed with sinking heart that it was going to be the next round.

He was right. Woodlock came out of his corner, shoulders hunched, chin low, deadly, crouched for action. He carried his gloves high, in front of his face, and his eyes, intent behind them, had the glitter of steel buttons. Stan's nerves felt and responded to the new tension. With nothing to lose, he attacked. Perfectly covered, he edged in, his left feeling for an opening. Woodlock, standing square on, his gloves flickering, invited him. Suddenly he dropped them. Stan jumped in. With a vicious ripple of white flesh, too swift to follow, Woodlock let loose a left and right at the same time, turning his head so that Stan's hard left drive grazed his ear.

The left Stan saw, and got his right glove in its way. The right took him full on the cheek below the eye. Its venom made him gasp, but his instinct was alert, he was fit, and in complete command of all his muscles. At once he thrust in, before Woodlock could get his arms down, driving hard with both hands to the body. Woodlock's right elbow was down in a flash, the long arm covering his stomach and heart, making a triangle with the line of his shoulders. He clipped Stan over the ear with a left hook, but Stan, using all his weight and strength, forced him backward against the ropes. Then, furiously trying to follow his advantage, he found himself tied up, helpless, unable to get loose from or to penetrate the long ubiquitous arms. They seemed like six, so completely did they foil him and protect his target.

'Break!'

Stan stood away at once. Woodlock wiped his nose on his glove, and with unbelievable swiftness swung a right at Stan's jaw. Stan jerked back, avoiding danger by half an inch, but Woodlock, instead of being off his balance, took two apparently meaningless steps sideways and came at him like a tiger.

The two minutes that followed were terrible to the people from Dycer's Bay. Stan was overwhelmed with punches that came at him from all directions. It was a merciless attack, swift, skilful, destructive, and it reduced Stan to a punch-bag. Woodlock gave him no chance to recover, no chance to step away, but kept the attack up at full speed. Stan did his best; he kept his head and stopped one punch in four; but he took a terrible pasting. The wonder was that he stayed on his feet. Only his perfect physical condition and a fearlessness that made flinching unthinkable took him through the round. He was dazed and staggering when the gong sounded. Ted had to run forward, take his arm, and lead him to his corner.

So one-sided was the round that, as he reached his stool, Woodlock cocked an inquiring brow at the referee. But Mr. Rogers was gravely marking his card, and, as soon as he had finished, sucked his teeth and gazed sadly and abstractedly at the ceiling.

In Stan's corner, Ted and the two seconds were working feverishly. One, squatting, lifted Stan's legs upon his thighs and massaged the calves of them. Another flapped the towel; and Ted, busy with a sponge full of water, splashed the bruised and bleeding face and wiped away the blood. Not much actual damage, he saw with relief. A cut lip, a nasty swelling under the left eye; but nothing bad.

And Stan had the wonderful recuperative powers of youth, of good blood, and clean living. He had received no vital blow, and, after thirty seconds, his head was clear, and his strength returning. When, with ten seconds to go, Ted stood back, looking anxiously into his face, and asking him "All right?" Stan replied with a grin.

"Cool!" he observed. "He don't 'alf dish it out!"

"C'n you go on?"

"You bet."

The grin was still on his face when he stood up, as the gong sounded, and advanced to face Woodlock. He knew, now, that it was all up. He was out of his class, miles out of his class. No one had ever served him like that, not even Archie Winter when he was his sparring partner. There was no answer to that sort of thing: no answer that Stan could provide. But he was still strong. His hope, his one and only hope, was to have a go.

How slender a hope it was the next two minutes showed. Woodlock advanced with cold impersonal ferocity, intent on finishing the business. Stan checked him for a few seconds with a rush and a stockish attack on the body: then he became once more a punch-bag.

Blood again crimsoned his face: Woodlock gave him the works with both hands, punching, jabbing, hooking: yet still, miraculously, Stan stood up to him and took it all.

The crowd, which never likes to see a game boy punished, began to shout in disapproval. Cries of "Stop it, ref!" increased: and the referee, his eyes intent on Stan, for the first time appeared to give the matter thought.

Then came one of those things that are always possible in the ring, upturning fights that have seemed settled past all doubt. Boxers know them well: they shrug and say 'a

lucky punch'. A volley of blows had staggered Stan, and for the moment winded Woodlock. He stood back, to get his breath and measure his man for a knock-out.

Stan, though dazed, and able to see Woodlock only as a pale shape in continual motion, had still not been hit in a vital part. He had not been flurried. In all the welter of blows he had managed to protect his stomach, his chin, and his heart. When Woodlock stepped back, the cessation of those pounding, merciless fists was an amazing relief. He wanted to sit down and rest, but his instinct told him the gong had not yet gone. He smiled, and took a wondering step or two in his new freedom.

'Look out!'

It was an agonised cry from his corner, the voice of Ted. Like an awl it pierced his bemused mind, and put him on the alert again. He turned his head, and, still indistinctly, saw Harry, coolly measuring him, about to spring in for the kill.

Resolve sharpened in Stan, a willingness more than a movement of anger. All right, Stan boy. You boxed 'im, and he's beat you. Now you really *can* have a go!

As Woodlock came in, Stan rose on the balls of his feet, toppled towards him, and with all the strength left in him drove a furious right upwards at the white, leaping shape.

Woodlock, when he stepped away from Stan, had once more cocked an eyebrow at the referee. Stan seemed out on his feet: his eyes were vague, and he was swaying. Woodlock, the professional, had no interest in punishing his man. He wished to know if he were to knock him cold, or if the referee would spare him the trouble. But the referee, who had seen many fights pulled out of the fire, nodded to him to box on. Very well. It was all one to Woodlock. He eyed his victim, chose his opening, set himself, and jumped in.

Too late, when his own blow was well on the way, he saw Stan suddenly let drive. The punch took him exactly where the ribs part, knocking from him a gasp that was heard all over the hall. He did not drop—probably because Stan was leaning against him: but his knees went, and he toppled forward, hanging on to Stan.

Then there was such an uproar that nothing could be heard. The referee cried 'Break! break!' and tapped Woodlock on the shoulder.

Stan's head was clear. He had felt the blow land, he knew what had happened. With all that was left of his strength, he set himself to take advantage of it. Shoving Woodlock away, he began methodically to pound away at him with slow but heavy punches.

But Woodlock had not got where he was in the boxing world by a fluke. Just able to keep on his feet, he sank his head on his chest, wrapped his long arms around himself, and, as well as his tottering legs could manage, he kept moving. Stan's blows, wild at first, landed on his arms, on the top of his head, anywhere but where they would do harm. Woodlock could not stand straight; his legs felt paralysed. His fighting brain told him that there could be only a few seconds left of the round. A less honest fighter would have made one of Stan's heavy clouts the excuse to go down and take a count. Woodlock, his prestige at stake, swayed and endured.

Luck is a wonderful tonic. Stan, more and more in command of himself, began to punch accurately. So fine was his condition, so inspiring the effects of his lucky blow, that his wits and eyes were clear, and he took his time, able at last to pick and direct his punches. A straight left turned Woodlock round and away, and a heavy right to his head sent him staggering sideways. The crowd yelled, frantic with surprise and excitement. Stan followed up, let drive another right—and, to his horror, the gong went as it landed.

'Sorry, Harry! sorry!'

In his anguish he caught hold of Woodlock, staring into his face in wild appeal. Woodlock grunted curtly, 'A' right, chum,' and was snatched away by his overwrought seconds. Stan turned to assure the referee he hadn't meant it, but the referee with a nod and a half-smile pointed him to his corner, whither the delirious Ted was pulling him.

'Oy! 'Ere!——'

Stan's protests were unheeded as they slapped and

splashed and pinched him. No time was wasted on exhortation. Not till he jerked away the stool did Ted cry in his ear 'Go after him, Stan. Don't let up. Give him all you've got.'

Woodlock came out of his corner with a pretence of sprightliness: but Stan's blow, from which he had not yet recovered, had had the unfortunate effect of slowing him down. Until he could recover from its effects, he was no faster than Stan. Discovering this, he abandoned his specious attempt to attack, and defended himself. The last thing he wanted was to swap punches with a real strong opponent. So he covered up and swayed and dodged: and, although at a disadvantage owing to the weakness of his legs—they still felt numb, and would not straighten properly—by sheer rusecraft he managed to keep going and avoid further damage.

But Stan was recovering, too. Hope, the cheers of the audience, the knowledge that, come what might, he had done well, put heart and strength into him. What was more, he did not get wild: he remembered his craft, and, boxing as never before, he gave the experienced Woodlock all he could do to keep out of danger. As the round progressed, Stan did better and better. For the first time in his career, he was allowed a chance to take Archie Winter's advice, and use his loaf. Given the initiative, he took it; and all Woodlock's skill did not save him from half a dozen well-placed punches.

The crowd yelled their disapproval of Woodlock's covering-up tactics, and taunted him with cowardice: but he was too old a hand to be put off by that sort of thing. His legs were coming back, he was getting a rest, and, despite a punch in the ribs that made him wince a few seconds before the end of the round, he went back to his corner satisfied that the worst was over.

'A' right,' he remarked to his manager as he relaxed on the stool. 'Didn't 'urt me.' And he stuck out his tongue for the refreshing splash of the sponge.

Stan, strong and confident, sat up straight, impatient to go on.

'I ought to 'ave got 'im,' he said to Ted. 'I ought to 'ave got 'im.'

'Don't worry your 'ead,' came the reply, staccato from Ted's efforts on his muscles. 'You done fine. You took the round by a mile.'

If he had any hopes for Stan, however, they disappeared in the next round. Not that Woodlock did anything startling. He still let Stan do all the attacking, he still covered up, he still appeared to be suffering from the paralysis of that lucky punch. But Ted's skilled eye, fixed on his legs, saw that they were now moving briskly and easily. Woodlock was in command again, allowing Stan to tire himself, or become over-confident. Stan still boxed well. Twice he drove Woodlock into awkward corners, against the ropes, making him writhe like an eel and hold on: and then, suddenly, after the last command to break, Woodlock let him come in and hooked him cleanly to the head with a left and right, as easily and surely as if Stan had no defence at all.

Ted caught his breath. The round was Stan's; but he knew it was all over now. Woodlock was fighting fit again. Warned by what had happened, he would run no more risks. There would be no more lucky punches.

Stan came back cheerful to his corner. He had been working hard, but he was in good shape: a little tired, glad of a breather, but more than ready to go on.

'How'm I doin', Ted?' he inquired proudly, as well as the vigorous massage would let him.

'Fine, boy. Keep after 'im.'

Ted's heart was heavy as he spoke. There was nothing else to tell the boy.

'Be careful of 'is right,' he added, as an afterthought. 'I got the feelin' 'e's gettin' stronger.'

Then Stan surprised him.

'I know. 'E's foxin' me.'

'Sev-enth raound. Seconds out.'

'Good luck, Stan boy!'

Ted clapped him on the shoulder, and watched him go. Queer chap, Stan. Saw a lot more than you'd think.

Ah! Woodlock was shaping differently now, stepping around fast, set for attack, his gloves darting in and out before his face. Stan's efforts to keep the initiative broke down altogether. Woodlock, moving with a dancer's grace, forced him into a position of defence. With a series of quick leads, Woodlock tested him. The blows did not hurt, but Stan was bewildered. Even though he had spotted that Woodlock was foxing, his mind and his movements were still directed to attack, and he could not adjust himself to the change. Ted's breath came with a hiss of agony as he saw Stan hesitate and then make a clumsy, uncovered rush, like the charge of a bull-calf. But Woodlock did not take the opening. He was content to stop the rush, pressing with his gloves on Stan's biceps, and fending him off with the adroitness of an acrobat. It was the seventh round: there was plenty of time.

He rushed Stan, careful not to exert himself too much, and landed some light, quick blows to the head, stepped away, feinted, chanced a right at the heart, missed, followed up at once with a stiff left to the head, suddenly used his weight and drove Stan sideways to the ropes; then, as Stan, recovering his balance, desperately covered up from the expected torrent of punches, he stood nonchalantly away and waited for Stan to recover and come at him.

The crowd yelled angrily.

'Gaa, you fool!'

'Why don't you go in after 'im, when you got 'im!'

Woodlock smiled. The move was a good investment. It unsettled Stan, as he knew it would. It was safer, too. To crowd in on a strong boy like Stan, who knew enough of the game to know he couldn't defend himself, was to risk another of those sudden desperate punches which you couldn't guard against, because you couldn't foresee them.

As it was, Stan recovered his balance, and, with a slowness which once more made Ted gasp in anguish, came tentatively forward, set himself, and started after his man. The crowd was silent. Woodlock's move had exposed Stan's limitations for all to see. Not a man in the hall but realised

that, in those two unfocused seconds, Woodlock could have hit him where he pleased.

As Stan came forward, a few tried to hearten him and themselves with well-meant cries.

'After 'im, Stan boy. After 'im!'

'Ave a go!'

Stan needed no heartening. His heart was sound, and his will. But his brief hour was over. Once again he was the artisan, plodding industriously and doggedly after the master craftsman.

Indolent, assured, Woodlock let him come. The attacks were strong, routine, straightforward, and wholly foreseeable. They gave him no trouble. He let several of them come because, each time, Stan was not rightly placed, not quite where he wanted him. Also, Stan was tiring. He grunted with each attempted blow: he was getting slower. Yet, for all his clumsiness, he was hard to hit where it mattered. Otherwise, the fight would have been over long ago, and that lucky punch would never have landed.

Woodlock was just deciding to save it for the next round, when, with half a minute to go, his chance came. Stan came in at him a bit ragged, with his arms high. Leaning forward, stiffening on his toes, Woodlock shot a left to his stomach. It landed perfectly. Stan hiccupped, and involuntarily dropped his hands. Quick as a leopard, Woodlock changed feet, and with a force that seemed to start in his right heel, and run all through his body into his right glove, he crashed it sideways to the point of Stan's chin.

Stan stood for an appreciable space of time, maybe half a second, looking thoughtfully at the floor. Then his knees went limp under him, and he fell on his face.

The referee stooped over him, and began to count, but there was no question of his getting up. At 'eight' he moved a glove, as if to reach for something: but he was still inert as a half-filled sack when his seconds ran across and picked him up and carried him to his corner.

A splash of water on his face and neck soon brought him round. He opened his eyes, heard the roar of the hall rise and fall, rise and fall, then, as his senses cleared, fill his

ears like thunder. Wonderingly he gazed into the smiling affectionate face of Ted, nodding and beaming at him. Hands were patting his shoulder. Then Ted stood aside and a tall figure in a dressing-gown bent over him, his conqueror.

Woodlock took his hand. Stan struggled to rise but Woodlock with a firm hand on his shoulder held him down.

'Good show, Stan boy. Hell of a lotta guts. That was a beauty you fetched me.'

Stan beamed at him in pure love.

'Thanks, Harry. Glad I gave you a bit of a fight. I am: your class, never will be, and I know it.'

'Give me a fight! I'll say you did. For a' right! If you come.'

He pulled Stan to his feet. Ted, his face creased in a network of smiles, put a dressing-gown on Stan's shoulders. Woodlock led him to the middle of the ring, hugged him, pointed to him, then ducked under the ropes, leaving Stan to enjoy such an ovation as he had never heard, and never would hear again.

XIII

'MY WIFE?' Walter looked dreamily at Stan and Mr. Antrim. He had reached the stage of intoxication when he had to shape his lips carefully in order to articulate the words. 'My wife was unavoidably postponed.'

If his listeners were in any way dissatisfied with this statement, neither let on. Mr. Antrim, glass in hand, affected to consider it, and nodded gravely. Stan, in a beatific haze, continued to beam vague goodwill.

They were sitting in the accustomed room at 'The Peace', where the company had gathered to celebrate Stan's glorious defeat by Young Woodlock. The occasion was memorable for yet another reason. Stan, after consultation with the faithful Ted, had decided to quit the ring. He knew his measure. He would never be more than a third-rater; and where was the sense of carrying on ingloriously for five or six years, getting cauliflower ears and a nose neither ornamental nor useful, in exchange for a few pounds here and there? How much better to finish on this splendid note, and go down to local history as the boy who gave Young Woodlock a rough passage and came near to knocking him out.

With this decision all at 'The Peace' concurred. Stan had put it to them, the next evening but one after the fight, feeling that so momentous a step should not be taken before they had been consulted. In a speech of unprecedented eloquence—it lasted just over a minute—he explained how he and Ted felt, how glad Lily had been—here he blushed—to hear what he had in mind, and how he did not think that he would be letting his friends and backers down, since after his lucky fight with Woodlock he would almost surely be matched with men who would beat him, so that no money would be made by supporting his chances. And, fatal omen, confirming all he and Ted had thought, Gus Vupsey was reputed to be unimpressed by his performance, and to show no enthusiasm at all about booking him for further fights.

This speech, and the consideration for them which it expressed, won the warmest approval from the company. From a chorus of assent Trevannion came out with an oration afterwards held to be his masterpiece. It extolled Stan's conduct, past and present, it lauded his courage, it thanked him for his thought of the company, it absolved him of all responsibility to them in the realm of financial speculation, and urged him, finally, to rest upon his laurels and get out of a hard and perilous game with the maximum of credit and with unimpaired physique. So finished was the speech, so well did it express what the company felt and would have wished to say, that they applauded heartily when it was ended. Even the Mountaineer rose and clapped Trevannion on the back, declaring that Forbes Robertson himself could not have put the case with greater eloquence.

So, on an evening long to be remembered in the annals of Dycer's Bay, the company met to celebrate the last fight and the retirement of Stanley Gummick from the profession he had followed with such deep yet unavailing love. Elaborate plans had been drawn up: at one stage of the evening, Trevannion was to make a speech and a presentation: but the company had very soon become too drunk to adhere to any set programme, and there was every sign that by now the details had been forgotten. Even Trevannion, who neglected no occasion for display, did not seem to recall what was expected of him. If he did, a glance at the others must have told him that they were in no mood to listen. Except for George Dubbidge, who sat staring straight in front of him, deep in an amiable trance, they were engaged in intimate discourse one with another. Only their extreme gravity, and an occasional excessive gesture, betrayed the fact that every one of them was well on in drink.

Joe found them thus, when he came in on the third of his periodic visits to see how they did. Mr. Antrim, Walter and Stan sat in a huddle close to the fire-place, and on the other side Trevannion was in the midst of a long story to the Mountaineer. The Mountaineer knew that he was drunk, but was anxious not to show it. He felt unable to demur

from anything which was said to him, however odd it sounded. In the first place, he could not be sure whether he had heard it straight: and the effort to assess it, to relate it to fast receding standards of fact and probability, called for a concentration of which he was no longer capable. He therefore listened with a slightly worried air to the narrative which Trevannion was pouring into his ear.

'Did I ever tell you about my pet dogfish, Mount? My dogfish Ponto? A most intelligent creature. I felt his loss deeply: deeply.'

The Mountaineer leaned forward.

'Where did you keep him?'

'In a kennel.' Trevannion looked at him severely, as if the question were ridiculous. 'To begin with, he had a tank with some water close beside, with an inclined plank so that he could walk up it and get in. I was weaning him, you see. By degrees.'

'Weaning him?' The Mountaineer's brows made a series of perplexed ridges.

'Figuratively speaking, Mount. From his element, if you follow me. I wished him to be independent. When I had him first, I filled the tank with salt water. Then I changed it to fresh. After some months, we were able to dispense with it altogether: and I put a collar on him.'

'Remarkable!' the Mountaineer exclaimed. 'Pray continue, Trevannion. You interest me extremely.'

Trevannion bowed.

'I had a pond in the garden, in which there were four goldfish. Now'—he waved a thick forefinger in front of the Mountaineer's nose, and kept it moving to and fro for the remainder of his speech—'it would have been—would it not?—the creature's natural instinct to devour these fish. You agree?'

'Undoubtedly.' The Mountaineer squinted, half hypnotised, at the waving finger. 'Undoubtedly.'

'I am glad to have your corroboration. Let me shake your hand, Mount. Thank you. Well, so intelligent was the creature, so docile, so amenable——'

'So adaptable.'

—‘And so adaptable (thank you, Mount. The very word) *and* so adaptable, that, from being the natural foe, Ponto became the loving guardian of my goldfish. He would wriggle his way along, each morning, to count them and make sure they were well: and as he looked, his fins would quiver with affection, almost as violently as they did when I came along.’

‘Astonishing, Trevannion. Astonishing.’

‘You will ask—I can see the question forming in your mind—you will ask what danger the goldfish were in, what risk for them my beloved Ponto had in mind when, each morning, the moment I released him from his lead, he wriggled down the path to count his charges.’ Trevannion paused dramatically. ‘A cat. A large cat, ginger-haired, *farouche*, *feroce*—ferocious. This brute and Ponto were sworn enemies. The growls of Ponto, when the cat approached, were bloodcurdling to hear: positively bloodcurdling.’ Trevannion shook his head, and his eyes misted over. ‘It was through this accursed cat that I lost my friend.’

Much moved, the Mountaineer leaned forward, and put a hand on Trevannion’s knee.

‘Did the cat——’

‘Never!’ Trevannion threw back his head, and spoke with ringing scorn. ‘Ponto would have had the cat’s head off with a single snap of his jaws. He was a match for twenty cats. No. The tragedy came about in quite another way. I suppose, in a sense, I was to blame,’ Trevannion broke off, and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. ‘Forgive me, Mount. Even after all these years, I can hardly bring myself to speak of it.’

‘Trevannion. My dear fellow. If it is painful to you——’

‘No, no. I must not give way to unmanly weakness.’ He shook his head, as if the grief were water in his hair, and he was trying to shake it away. ‘One morning, roused from my work by a terrific outburst of snarls and growls, I rushed out and saw the cat, crouched over the pond, glaring down at the terrified occupants. I ran to Ponto, snapped back his chain. Like an arrow—no, not quite like an arrow: he

swivelled from side to side'—in vigorous pantomime Trevannion indicated with his hand the dogfish's course—'Ponto sped down the path: just in time! The cat was in the very act of scooping up the first and fattest goldfish in her paw. Intent upon her prey, she did not hear Ponto till he was within a yard of her. Then, a screech, a scurry, a frantic leap—and she was over the wall, leaving a portion of her tail in Ponto's jaws.'

The Mountaineer gave a gasp of relief. Then his brow furrowed again.

'But you said—you implied—that Ponto——?'

'Ah, my friend,' Trevannion clasped him by his bony wrist. 'My lessons had been all too successful. He had adapted—I had weaned him all too well. Unable to check his rush for the cat, he fell into the pond. And there, with the goldfish he had come to succour looking helplessly on, unable to aid him . . . he was drowned.'

There was a silence. Trevannion let go of the Mountaineer's wrist, took out a handkerchief, and dried his eyes. The Mountaineer patted his arm.

'Did—did you recover the body?' he asked at last, in hushed tones.

'Yes. My old friend was stuffed, and now hangs, suspended from the ceiling, in the local museum.'

'A most affecting story,' the Mountaineer said. 'I trust it has not grieved you too much to relate it.'

'No. No. To tell it to a listener so sympathetic as yourself, Mount, an artist who knows the world and understands the soft spots in a man's make-up, has been a privilege. It has eased my heart. You may believe me, when I tell you that I have never spoken of this before, to a living soul.'

'I am honoured, my dear Trevannion. I am deeply honoured. But—if you will forgive my saying so—you should no longer keep so remarkable a history to yourself. Once you have mastered your grief, a public communication—a learned monograph——?'

Trevannion shuddered. 'Please! I could not bear that—yet.'

'But, perhaps, at some time in the future——?'

'I will consider it. I will give it thought. But, for the present—no.'

'I understand.' The Mountaineer patted him again. 'I understand perfectly, my dear fellow.'

The pair started, as George Dubbridge, who apparently had not heeded a word, suddenly spoke without looking at them or changing his bemused stare.

'I know some chaps what caught one of these 'ere eels, conger eels they calls 'em, and cut off its 'ead and sewed a dead cat's 'ead on instead. Very clever, they done it. Fitted a treat. They took it round on a barrow, showing of it orf, and collected five and ninepence. After that, they tried to sell it to ole Braddock, as keeps the little restaurant in Castle Street, to put in the window and attract custom, like. But ole Braddock, 'e took a dekkko at it, and 'e didn't reckon it would do 'im no good, neither to the sossidge side of 'is business nor yet to 'is fried fish: so 'e told 'em to take it orf the premises and be quick about it. Very narked, they was.'

This narrative was felt by both Trevannion and the Mountaineer to be an anti-climax, if not in positive bad taste. They looked severely at George, and made no comment. Fortunately, George did not appear to mind. He continued to gaze straight in front of him: so that, after a minute or two, neither of them could be sure that he had spoken at all.

In the meantime, Walter had come through to one of those patches of saddened but inspired lucidity which visit the very drunk. Indeed, the entire evening was like that for them all—a series of vivid but unconnected episodes, bright beads, threaded on a string of oblivion. There were no transitions: first this was happening, then that. Now it was half-past eight, now it was ten past nine; and no one knew what had happened in between.

Walter leaned back, his eyes wide with the wonder and urgency of what he was seeing.

'People say "I had a dream",' he proclaimed. 'They didn't have a dream. They escaped from their skins for a while. What they dreamed, happened. Just as much as anything

else ever happened. As Ted Holmes used to say—he was a friend of mine, you wouldn't know him. Your loss, gentlemen. As Ted Holmes used to say "When we are awake we are dreaming. When we dream, we live."

'I wouldn't care to live in some of my dreams,' Mr. Antrim said.

'Ah, who knows? You may be living at last. They may be your real life, the life to which you are bound.'

'I sincerely hope not.'

Walter frowned, and waved a hand. He was on the clear tide of prophecy. He did not want interruptions.

'I have wandered through hell in what you call dreams. And other places. I have met the dead, over and over again. Spoken with them. After all, what are the dead? Concentrate on that, gentlemen. Ask yourself that. It will concern you, sooner or later, so concern yourself with it now.'

Mr. Antrim, a little pale, stirred in his chair and hiccupped. The conversation was not to his liking. Stan stared owlishly. Owing to his condition, he could hear the other conversation better than this one.

From his Olympian eyrie, Walter continued to look down on poor mortality. Once more he waved his sensitive, bony hand.

'What nonsense it all is. One man cuts another man's head off, here, where we live'—Mr. Antrim looked uneasily round—'and we decide to kill that man because he killed the other man, but in cold truth neither man is killed at all. The god in them lives on, and it is a waste of time spilling the blood. People don't know these things. They go on making paper hats and concentrate on pinching a shilling here and there or sleeping with another man's wife. Next starry night when you are coming home—avoiding the holes in the road—stare up. Keep gazing at the millions of stars above you. And if you keep long enough at it—still avoiding the holes in the road—everything will be revealed to you. Everything. You will understand at last.'

'Yes, gentlemen. Remember your dreams. Concentrate on them. Then you live twice. Asleep. Awake. Awake. Asleep. Tuppence for a penny. Yes.' His eye fixed itself

ironically to Mr. Antrim. "I thought that would appeal to you."

Mr. Antrim blinked. By the time he had understood it was too late to reject the insult and Walter had passed on.

"I would appeal to a what Mount calls the nucleus of you but to the god. The spark, the spirit, a god. When you look up at those stars as I often have, at a dark, cold What we seek is here at time and space—the atom, the spread his hands—no nothing. A sound—yes—a vast scheme. Time isn't any more than that god. The whole. Conception. Our sun. Our moon. Our stars. The actual. Perish perhaps. There are billions of other planets. Our God. God the Father is a god of the supermundane. He has a mind this and—this is what He is very likely a sort of god if we could see him. A sort of mind. He derives from a bigger God. That God of Power derives from another, and another, and another, and so, way back. Each Power with its spread of worlds to mind. The scheme is so vast that I—I don't think about you, but I—I personally can grasp the fact that we have had no beginning and can have no end. Because it involves time and there is no such thing as time. But there are Gods. Millions of them. And in each of us is a world God, and for this reason we die not die. We never will die. The spark is simply shifted about from one part of the ether until it fits. That's all, gentlemen. There is the vast scheme for you. The sorry I can't put it better. I've said it all this for years."

He paused, leaned right back with the realization of the drunk, and looked at the ceiling. To recover himself and to adjust his focus, was a physical effort.

"What do you say to all this?" he inquired of Mr. Antrim.

Mr. Antrim screwed up his face, whether in disgust or Walter's speculations or because of the difficulty of bringing his mind to bear on them was hard to say.

"Such matters are out of my province," he replied. "I know enough only to be aware that your views are unorthodox."

'You deny your spark of divinity, your speck of god, do you?'

'I would rather say I am in no position to claim it. However, that is not what——'

'Concentrate on your dreams, lawyer. Immerse yourself in them. They are the road to mastery. When you can move at ease in your dreams, when you can move at will, and no longer be shoved around, as the neophytes are—then you haven't long to live. You are nearly ripe. Nearly ready.'

'I have no wish to shorten my life.'

Walter pointed at him. 'Ripeness is all. But I won't argue with you. Joe—where's Joe? Joe, give Mr. Antrim some more to drink. A lot more. He's not drunk enough. I dislike a man who stays sober while others are drunk.'

'I *am* drunk,' Mr. Antrim protested. 'It takes me a different way, that's all.'

'It doesn't take you far enough.' Walter's tone was so dreamy it robbed his words of insult. 'However—Joe is not here, I have not sufficient control of my faculties to administer drink to you, and, very possibly, if I did, it would only make you vomit. So we will have to leave you as you are.'

Then, next minute, as it seemed, Joe was there, engaged in a long but apparently amiable discourse with Trevannion and the Mountaineer. Walter tried to listen, but could not make out what it was about. Everyone seemed to be talking too fast. George Dubbidge came out of his trance and started to talk to Stan about some of his relations.

'My Uncle Arnold, him as lives at 'Igh Wycombe—when 'e 'ad 'is change o' life——'

'Get out, George. Men don't have a change of life, only women.'

'My Uncle Arnold did, somethin' shockin'.' George looked mulish. Walter's interruption evidently made him forget what he intended to say about the androgynous Arnold, and he went off on a parallel track.

'Is sister, that's my Auntie May, she 'ad a dreadful time with young Edner.'

'Did she now.' Walter looked across at the others.

'Yès. 'Er fifth, Edner was. Took very bad after. 'Ad the purpural fever. Shockin' illness. All the milk rushes to the 'ead.'

To avoid these details, Walter pulled himself to his feet, and tried to co-ordinate his powers to cross the room. A sinister humming penetrated his ear.

'Ugg ulgur gollom glutchy glub,

'Oll glotcher——'

'Oh lord,' he thought, with a sudden sick feeling, 'Trev's going to turn ugly.' And in a real and passionate concern that no jarring note should spoil the evening's harmony, he staggered towards Trevannion and flopped on the settle, prepared to rebuke him.

But Trevannion was not attacking anybody. If he felt splenetic, he was working off his spleen on abstractions.

'I would establish a Ministry of Appropriate Nomenclature,' he proclaimed, in his fruitiest tones. 'As Minister, I should——'

'Oh, you'd be Minister, would you?'

'Inevitably. As Minister, I should rechristen those who had received their names by chance, or mere inheritance. The name should suit the owner. The base should be blazoned forth in all their spiritual ignominy. Evadne Jane, pining to escape in matrimony from her maiden name of Gulk, would weep to find herself Mrs. Saul Golbommick. I would devise surnames that branded their recipients for ever: Grobsey, Futchins, Dollygobble. The insufferable affection of Fenella, Lady Strong-i'-the-arm would be suitably chastened by the geographically far more accurate label of Bertha, Lady Big-i'-the-bum. Lord Swuttle—Sir Benjamin Bammins——'

'Shut up, Trev. You have a nasty mind.'

'I fail to see Walter, what you find to complain of. You will admit that my names are spiritually appropriate.'

'All your ideas are to annoy people, and disconcert them, and make fools of them. That's why I say you have a nasty mind.'

'Are not one's thoughts coloured by their subject? Can

one think pleasantly of the unpleasant, entertain lyrical fancies—

He broke off, as a loud cry rang through the room. Walter's gaze followed his, rather more slowly, and they beheld the Mountaineer, who had somehow slipped away during this exchange, standing at his full height and pointing an accusing finger at Mr. Antrim.

'Monster! Attorney! Villain! You reveal yourself in your true colours.'

'Gor! what's happened now?'

They got up, Walter holding on to Trevannion's arm, and went across. Mr. Antrim was pink and bewildered.

'Now, now, Teddie. What's all this?'

'I assure you, gentlemen, I have done nothing. Nothing at all. I merely inquired of Mr. Watteau his opinion on some remarkable views upon theology communicated to me by our friend Walter.'

'Well,' Trevannion said. 'You seem to have got it.'

The Mountaineer stood, shaking, in the grip of some obscure passion.

'He utters blasphemy. He reduces Thee, O God, to the level of the drink he so avidly swallows.'

'I only told him what you said, Walter. I asked him what he thought of it.'

'Yet he has an immortal soul. Yes, lawyer—corrupt though you are, debauched, debased, miserable, you have an immortal soul. I will pray for you.'

Before anyone could stop him, he fell upon his knees, upright, gaunt, rapt, mad; Don Quixote in Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers.

'O merciful, most compassionate God, Divine Saviour, Creator of all things, have mercy on this man. I have used him as my friend, I have tried to think well of him, but he is a man with great limitations. Forgive him, Lord. He cannot have known what he did. Forgive him, as You must. O Lord, You made him. You made us all. You made the world.'

To their consternation, he covered his face in his long, bony hands, and burst into tears.

Trevannion and Walter took him each by an elbow, and tried to pull him to his feet.

'Up you come, Mount. Pull yourself together. Ups-a-daisy. There's the boy.'

'A noble emotion, Mount,' Trevannion soothed him. 'We honour you for it. But enough of it for now. This is neither the time nor the place.'

The Mountaineer turned to him his thin, ravaged face, its furrows glistening with tears.

'Any time and any place are fit to pray for an immortal soul. Do not forget that even this man is made in the image of God.'

Between them they persuaded the Mountaineer to sit. Trevannion beckoned to Joe, who was in the room again, and Joe, sizing up the situation at once, mixed the Mountaineer a glass which rendered him speechless—though only for a time.

'Damn it,' Walter said to Trevannion, as they sat back to watch the Mountaineer thaw and become foolish under Joe's ministrations, 'I started all that. It's not at all the note we want. Isn't that always the way!'

He broke off, to stare in wonder.

'I don't follow you, Walter. Isn't what always the way?'

'Introduce a religious idea to the world, particularly if it's a new one, and first of all people are shocked, and then they start to fight.'

'There is a Biblical precedent, certainly.'

Walter thought for a moment or two more. Then he roused himself.

'To hell with theology. Let's all have another drink.'

'Let us all have two more drinks.'

Walter gesticulated, and showed the whites of his eyes.

'Three, if you like, Trev. Make it three.'

There ensued a haze of warmth and dazzle and mutual love, of which no one carried away any clear remembrance. The first point that registered on more than one present was that the Mountaineer and Mr. Antrim were standing up, in maudlin reconciliation, the Mountaineer's arm round

Mr. Antrim's shoulders, announcing their intention to go out and fish.

It took some time for this intention to impress itself on the company, but they were by now in a suggestible mood, and, once they had grasped the idea, they welcomed it.

'We want to fish!'

The Mountaineer led the chorus, giving a signal with his hand.

'We want to fish!'

And Trevannion, asserting his individuality, followed up in a full baritone, 'A-fishing we will go.'

Joe thrust his head in at the door.

• 'What's all this? What do you want now?'

They were silent, like guilty children. The Mountaineer, swaying, eyed Joe, and pointed.

'We want to fish. Bring tackle.'

He made a peremptory gesture, all but upsetting himself and Mr. Antrim.

'Hold up, lawyer. Hold up. We want to fish.'

'Fish, is it?' Joe surveyed them. 'Well, ye can't. It's rainin'.'

Trevannion turned to Walter.

'Project impracticable. It's raining.'

Walter nudged Stan.

'No good, Stan. Raining.'

Stan blinked. His mind had been elsewhere. Walter called across him to George, who nodded gravely, and added, as an afterthought, 'Get wet.'

The Mountaineer, however, refused to admit defeat.

'Rain,' he declared, with another sweeping gesture, 'is immaterial. In my professional days, at the—the ze-ze—'

'Zerubbabel?' offered Trevannion helpfully.

—'at the zenith of my career—be quiet, Trevannion—at the zenith of my career, which lasted for many years:' he appeared to have forgotten his original theme, but recovered it. 'In the event of rain, I took a cab.'

He drew himself up, and looked around upon them. 'I shall take a cab now.'

'Will ye, so. Ye'll be lucky if you get one this hour o' the night.'

The Mountaineer turned to Mr. Antrim.

'You approve, lawyer?' He shook Mr. Antrim, who hiccupped. 'The lawyer approves. Let a cab be called.'

Joe smiled on him.

'I'll see what I can do for ye.'

He withdrew, and was away so long it seemed as if he relied on the Mountaineer's forgetting his project. Presently he put his head in again.

'Does he still want the cab?' he asked Walter. 'The rain's stopped.'

Before Walter could answer, the Mountaineer caught sight of Joe, and began once more to inquire about the cab.

'Old Daly's in the bar. He says, if you want him, he'll fetch his cab down. How far did ye want to go?'

'To the pier. To the water. We cannot fish on dry land.'

'It'll cost you five shillin'.'

'We will give him ten. Will we not, attorney? We will give him ten.'

'Ten,' corroborated Mr. Antrim.

'There you are, Blake. Tell him he shall have ten. And—Blake—we shall require tackle. And bait.'

'Aye,' Walter added. 'For us all.'

'Glory be to God. Are you goin' fishin' too?'

'Every man jack of us,' Trevannion said. 'So bring all the tackle you have.'

'I haven't but three lines in the place. And one of them's for conger.'

'"The conger, the conger, the king of all fish",' Trevannion chanted. '"For sport and for fighting, the crown of the dish." It isn't, you know. It's bloody awful. All oil and bones. Still, let us capture one, as the crown of our evening.'

'Will I bait it for ye?'

'Do, Joe, do. With a large and succulent fish. The crown of the dish.'

There was no difficulty about dividing up the party. The Mountaineer and Mr. Antrim clung to each other like a

pair of elderly and dissipated monkeys, and Trevannion, whose intoxication was mostly on the surface, calculated that they would be safer in a cab. Let loose on the pier, they could hardly be trusted not to fall in. He made this remark to Joe, when he came in with the lines and the bait, and Joe with a wink agreed.

'Old Daly'll look after them. He has a great experience. He did a lot of drivin' to the races.'

There was a delay in starting, as the Mountaineer wanted his line tied to the end of his Alpenstock, to make a fishing-rod. He took ill the advice to wait till he reached the pier, and brandished his weapon, to the great danger of bottles and electric light: but Joe and Walter calmed him down, explaining that it was impossible, until he was at the water's edge, to know how much line to allow. So, laughing and shouting, they came out into brilliant moonlight, shining on the wet roofs and clean-washed streets, to find Daly's ancient horse and even more ancient cab at the door: the cab an inky shadow with a glistening top, the horse propped up on its own erratic, sprawling shadow. Joe, helping them out, thanked his stars it was past closing time, and there was no crowd from the public bar to gape and cheer and laugh and create a scandal.

The shock of the open air produced its effect upon all parties. Mr. Antrim's knees gave under him. He had to be lifted to the cab.

'It takes me like this,' he explained quite coolly. 'My head's clear. I'll be all right soon.'

The Mountaineer staggered regally, but scorned help, and somehow managed to reach the cab. His entry into it was much delayed by his refusal to let go of the Alpenstock, which got tangled up with his arms and his legs and the driver's seat, and finally endangered the windows. At this Daly and Joe between them twisted it out of his grasp, and shoved him, scrabbling like a daddy-long-legs, into the small aperture after Mr. Antrim. Daly then lowered the window, and passed the Alpenstock in after him.

The party, rallying itself to start, next discovered that Stan was missing. Walter went off in search, returning soon

with Stan's arm through his. Stan looked pale, but in answer to tender inquiries reported that he now felt better.

'Are ye all ready, then?' Joe might have been starting a race. 'Off ye go.'

The cab drove away with a clatter, the Alpenstock sticking crazily out of its near-side window, and the rest of the party set off, reeling, arms linked, by the short cut between the houses: The cab was obliged to go the long way round.

They were not far ahead of it, however, owing to a tendency to stop and coalesce into a grotesque human knot, in order to argue, or signify eternal accord. Moreover, Walter, second from the right, made the interesting discovery that if he stopped suddenly, the others, continuing, were drawn into an irresistible collision. This struck him as very funny, and the others thought it a good joke too, and were obliged to hold on to each other and roar with laughter, until an extra violent collision caused Stan and George to bump heads. George came off worse of the two, and remained sitting in the road, rubbing his head, with a very rueful expression. The game was therefore declared dangerous, George was hauled to his feet—with some difficulty, and one total sprawl from which Trevannion, the only member not involved, had much ado to sort out rescuers from rescued—and the party continued its erratic course. Stan, whose wits the blow had cleared somewhat, expatiating on the evils of butting in the ring, and compiling short biographies of boxers given to that practice.

'Which it don't pay,' he concluded, 'besides bein' a very foul tactic.'

The final obstacle, a narrow alley-way with posts at each end, was at last negotiated, and the friends arrived at the little harbour. The tide was high, and still rising. The moon, ahead of them, cast a broad, glittering path across the waters. Walter looked, fascinated, at its edges. Hosts of little dark figures seemed to make their way into it at one side, duck under the brightness, and reappear at the other. It was only a trick of light and shadow playing on small waves, but, as he stared, the figures took eccentric, elfin shapes: they went capering into the broad band of light,

and emerged exultant, flinging up their little black heads and arms. He turned to point them out to Trevannion, reflected that he would be accused of seeing things, and closed his lips tight.

Trevannion, too, was in no position to observe them. With his broad behind in the air, he was bending down, unfastening the lines. Trev was never really drunk, Walter reflected. He drank level with the rest, the surface of his mind got drunk, but he kept most of his faculties. He was always able and ready to see the others home. Queer. Maybe he'd understand Trev, one day.

Then a noble clatter sounded on their left, and the cab rounded the corner by the obsolete life-boat shed and came into view. Out of its context, on the quayside, watered by the moon, it had a magical appearance. It had at one moment the darkness and the dull gleam of very old silver; then, making a detour to avoid a hole in the masonry, it looked as if someone had blown it sideways, and took on the wayward lightness of a large, unshapely bubble.

How much these aspects owed to alcohol Walter could not determine. He gazed with delighted curiosity, that of an artist, and saw the cab pull up. The Alpenstock waggled like an antenna in the moonlight, the Mountaineer poked out his head and shoulders and harangued the driver.

So loud was his voice, so passionate his gestures—limited though they were by the fact that less than half of him was sticking at an uncomfortable angle out of the small window—that Walter went up to see what was the matter. The dispute had been in progress for some time before he got there, so that he never mastered its intricacies, but he gathered that the Mountaineer was demanding that the cab be driven down the sloping jetty into the water, and Daly was refusing on the ground that to do this would give his old horse the rheumatics.

The clash of views went on for several minutes, until a compromise was reached, whereby Daly undertook to drive the cab down to the level part of the jetty, before the slope began, and pull up at the edge, so that the Mountaineer and Mr. Antrim could fish in comfort out of the right-hand

window. What was more, Daly got down from the box and fastened the Mountaineer's line to the end of the Alpenstock: and so, gingerly, with many a heave and creak, the old cab lurched down the uneven causeway and came to a halt a bare eighteen inches from the edge. There it stayed, Daly on the box, the old horse sniffing the seaweed and tossing his head in wonderment, and the Alpenstock protruding at a mad angle from the window, slim and irrelevant, like a reed in the moonlight.

What mad discourse, what fuddled cross-talk the cab contained for the hour and a half it stood by the water will never be known. Daly, once he was satisfied that the horse would stand and that his clients could not get at the reins, climbed stiffly down and waddled up to join the others. The Mountaineer and Mr. Antrim would get no fish, he told them with a wink. Their line was in three feet of water, and anyway the Mountaineer was giving a lecture and had forgotten about it.

The other four men sat in a row on the edge of the pier, their legs dangling foolishly, with the old cabman standing and watching them. At first they had expressed much concern on one another's account because of the danger of sitting so near the edge: but, on analysis, since each protested that he personally was all right, and was only worried about the others, Trevannion proclaimed that it was therefore safe for them all; and so it proved. They sat limp, so well relaxed that to fall in would have been an effort.

For a while they talked, but by degrees the beauty of the night took hold of them, and they fell silent. Walter held one line, Trevannion the other. Walter's was the conger line. It was white and heavy: in the moonlight, it looked more like a clothes-line than a fishing-line. The tide rippled and sucked among the rocks below their feet. Down on their left the voice of the Mountaineer droned on, its resonance dulled in the confined space of the cab, rising now and then to an argumentative climax. Soft murmurs from Mr. Antrim could occasionally be heard in such intervals as he was given. The moon's path shimmered across the water, and Walter, once more watching its edges, was brought back

to the first time he had watched them, as a child, and felt dawn in him once again a sense of the unending miracle and wonder of the world.

He was aroused by a sensation as if someone were plucking his sleeve. Thinking it was Trevannion, and vexed to be roused from his dream, he turned with a remonstrance. But Trevannion's broad shoulder was averted: he was trying to light a cigarette: and, as if to give him a full alibi, the tweak came again, sharp and insistent. Walter looked stupidly down at his hand, saw it jump, and realised with astonishment that the pull came from his line. There—again! he jerked in reply, and at once the line sprang into life, with a heavy, strong pull and an unmistakable feeling of panic travelling as on a wire.

Still Walter could hardly believe it. He stared at the taut line, felt the jerks that were now pulling at his forearm.

'Boys! boys! I've got a bite.'

He scrambled to his feet, and for an instant all but overbalanced and fell forward. Recovering himself, he stepped back and hauled it unsteadily with both hands. There was a wild splashing; Trevannion, craning forward, saw the gleam of a silver belly, and heard a madly energised swiggling and slithering. Walter, hauling and backing away, with his full weight lugged his captive up the uneven stony side of the pier, and in a matter of seconds it came into view: a lively young conger, between three and four feet long, very thick, leaping and contorting itself as though it were a piece of electric cable.

With startled cries, the others gained their feet, and came to look.

'Keep clear,' warned Trevannion. 'They can bite.'

As if to confirm him, the eel slithered near to George's feet. George, laughing foolishly, backed away, and was just saved from going over the edge into the water.

'George, you fool!'

George, still grinning, was pulled back to safety. All stood, watching the eel. Daly, removing his pipe, spat, and expressed profane surprise that an expedition he had looked upon as a farce should succeed in catching anything at all.

Between them, they must have made a great deal of noise, for a hail came from the cab. Turning to look, they saw in the moonlight the head of the Mountaineer sticking out and demanding what was the matter.

'A fish!' they called. 'An eel! we've caught an eel.'

Trevannion waved them to be silent. Making an unnecessary trumpet of his hands, he gave an amended version.

'Walter has captured a fish of enormous dimensions and extreme vitality.'

There was a moment of silence, while the fact sank in.

'Eureka!' cried the Mountaineer. 'We come.'

'Gawd,' exclaimed Daly. 'He'll fall in the water.'

And he waddled off as fast as he could go, crying 'Hold hard, sir. Hold hard a minute.'

There was reason for alarm, as the cab was so close to the edge of the jetty that even a sober man would have found difficulty in getting out on the same side. But Daly need not have hurried. The Mountaineer, in his efforts to open the door and climb out, forgot his Alpenstock and by good luck became involved with it. It got between his legs and, as it was still sticking out of the window, his weight upon it made it act as a brake, and hindered the opening of the door. The Mountaineer, imagining that some enemy was preventing his egress, put forth tremendous efforts, causing the cab to rock and the old horse to take a couple of uncertain steps forward.

'Whoa!' roared Daly. 'Whoa there! whoa!'

The horse stopped, the Mountaineer continued to plunge and vociferate, and the Alpenstock to save him from falling twelve feet into shallow water. Daly, waddling round on the far side to take the horse's head, found that Mr. Antrim had quietly climbed out, and was standing on the jetty, apparently quite oblivious of his friend's danger.

Pushing past him, Daly took the reins and led the old horse diagonally across the jetty until there was plenty of room for his other passenger to fall out on dry land. Then he went round to assist. The move had been just in time, for, as Daly got there, the Mountaineer somehow managed to shift his Alpenstock and fell sprawling out on all fours.

'Cor! are you 'urt, sir? You didn't 'alf give me a turn.'

The Mountaineer was up in a second. There was a rent in the left knee of his knickerbockers, but he heeded it no more than Daly's question.

'A fish! a fish! let us see this fish.'

He picked up his Alpenstock and capered off, waving it in the air. A dangerous swerve near the edge made Daly swear apprehensively again, but it was corrected, and the amazing improbable figure was safe on the pier.

Mr. Antrim emerged from his reverie.

'Fish,' he said mildly, smiled at Daly, and started after his colleague, walking with care and a certain steadiness. Daly spat and, calling on earth, sea, and air to witness his distaste for the whole occasion, started to lead the old horse round. The jetty was too narrow for a single turning: from where he was he had to back the cab closer to the edge, and then, sidestepping the horse so sharply that the shafts creaked in protest, swung the cab round in a series of stiff bumps, until it was headed inland.

Then he got up on the box, and, disgruntled, drove up to the safety of the pier.

When Mr. Antrim reached the others, he found them still standing in a wide, loose ring, looking at the eel. It belied the second part of Trevannion's eulogy by lying still and sulking. The Mountaineer commented on this and, stepping forward, prodded it with his Alpenstock. The galvanised leaping was not repeated. Instead, the eel began to slither purposefully towards the edge of the pier.

'Not so, my friend. Not so.'

The Mountaineer waltzed in front, diverting it, thwarting its course with the end of his Alpenstock.

'All right, Mount,' Walter said. 'It can't get away. It's on the line.'

But the Mountaineer, crying 'Obey, fish! obey!' pushed and prodded till he turned the eel over. It writhed, then slowly righted itself, uttered a coughing sound, and lay still.

'What the hell shall we do with it?'

Already Walter was becoming embarrassed by their captive, even sorry for it. The others were merely puzzled.

None was sober enough to try to get it off the hook. It would be necessary first to kill an eel of this size, and again even had they wished to do so, they had no weapon, and none was sufficiently sure of himself. Daly, appealed to, sourly refused to have anything more to do with the outing, and said he was going home.

Trevannion and Walter looked at each other, and nodded.

'I'll fix him,' Trevannion said. He went across to Daly, told him he wouldn't be wanted any more, thanked him for his care and trouble, and gave him a pound instead of the ten shillings he had asked.

Slightly mollified, but by no means altogether—he had had a fright, and that always upset his stomach—the cabman said a surly good night, called to the old horse, and drove away. Trevannion watched the cab go, and walked back to the others.

To his surprise, he found that the Mountaineer, in an access of energy, had taken charge of the situation. Declaring that he knew exactly what to do with the eel, he approached it, twined the thick line around the end of his Alpenstock, and then stood up, the Alpenstock over his shoulder, and the eel dangling a couple of feet from the end of it.

'Squad! Attention.'

The squad did their best to respond.

'By the right. Quick march!'

And he led off, the others following as best they could. Leaving the pier, the Mountaineer lifted up his voice.

'*Marlbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre,*' he began, but soon changed over to 'Our King went forth to Normandy': and startled citizens, roused from their beds and peering out of their windows, beheld in the moonlight a strange procession, led by a preposterous figure with an eel dangling from a pole over his shoulder, marching through the streets and singing, as well as could be distinguished, five songs at once.

The Mountaineer knew exactly where he was going. Unfalteringly he led them to the Town Hall, and stopped outside the Mayor's Parlour. There he unshipped his burden,

and called for a knife. George produced one: whereupon the Mountaineer cut the line a couple of feet above the eel, and, calling on George and Stan to help, succeeded after several efforts in posting the eel in the wide mouth of the Mayoral letter-box, where, as they took a triumphant leave, it could be heard thrashing about among the letters.

XIV

YET EVEN this achievement—described by Trevannion to its proud author as ‘a triumphant, a squamous affront to the Municipality’—was not the climax to an evening for ever momentous in the records of Dycer’s Bay.

Joe Blake had been obliged to interrupt very drastically his supper with Miss Jones in order to attend to the celebrants. He had looked forward to a peaceful epilogue over their final nightcap together, but, when he came in from seeing the party off to fish, he found to his dismay that Miss Jones had gone to bed.

Gazing at the table, Joe raised his brows and gave a soundless, rueful whistle. With a sinking of his stomach, he hoped that Miss Jones’s departure was not the result of pique. She had shown signs of impatience when he left the table for a second time to attend to the revellers. ‘A special occasion,’ he had assured her, but as he went out he thought he saw her toss her head. Oh well, if she wanted to be unreasonable——

Bolting the front door, putting the place to rights, he brooded unhappily on the ways of women. Miss Jones’s strategy, if strategy it was, worked very well. From inveighing against her in his mind, Joe passed to a condition in which nothing mattered but the way she would behave to him when they met in the morning. For an hour and a half he pottered about, unable to sit quiet, and knowing dismally that, if he went up to bed, he would not be able to sleep. An insane idea of knocking on Miss Jones’s door and inquiring whether she was all right he had the sense to reject, reasoning, with some remains of his usual sagacity, that, even if she were not in fact annoyed, she would realise that she had him where she wanted him, and so pretend to be: with the result that he would be unhappier than ever, and have made a show of himself into the bargain. Clearly though he saw this, the desire to go to her door was so strong that it was a good twenty minutes before he stopped

fingering the idea in his mind, and, pouring himself a third whisky, sat down at the forlorn supper-table, head in hands, and stared moodily at the wall.

He did not allow himself to review the whole problem of Miss Jones: he had not got to that yet. His trouble was that at long last he was feeling something, and feeling it sharply. His life had got out of hand. Miss Jones had, as he phrased it, 'threw him into a commotion'. He did not like it: yet a part of him, a small part, was behaving like a spaniel voluptuously expecting a blow. What way was this to act, for a man who had kept himself to himself all these years, and was in a fair way to become a snug man financially, a warm man, a very warm man indeed?

Thus Joe was in no conciliatory mood when a violent knocking at the front door roused him from his thoughts. For a moment he could not believe he had heard it. Who would be making such a noise this time of night? Then it burst out again, a cascade of blows, a violent fanfaronade that made the door rattle and set a dog barking on the far side of the street.

The police? Joe gave his conscience a quick review, and could see nothing to call for such remonstrance: nothing, anyhow, that could not keep till morning.

The knocking broke out again. Damn it, they would waken Miss Jones! He hurried into the bar, groped his way to the switch, growled 'Coming!' in a voice intended to be heard outside and not upstairs, and unbolted the door. It was in two halves, and opened inwards. He pulled one half open, and just escaped a blow from the Alpenstock raised for a further salvo. There, like a mad monolith, stood the Mountaineer.

'Blake! you have been a long time coming.'

A reproach was so far from what Joe expected that his own wrath was short-circuited.

'What do ye want?'

'I must come in. At once. On the most urgent business.'

A regular customer, with drink taken. Joe's professional reaction, a reflex almost, took charge of him. Before he

knew what he was doing he had let the intruder in, and fastened the door behind him.

'It's late,' he said, and led the way into the little parlour. 'It's a wonder I was up.'

The Mountaineer disregarded this. In the strong light Joe surveyed him closely. He looked wild, distraught even, but to Joe's skilled eye the effects of the drink seemed to have worn off.

'Take a chair,' Joe said. 'Now. Tell me what is it ye want.'

The Mountaineer looked at him. On occasions one felt that the inner man was looking at one from some eyrie, some pinnacle. He was looking like this at Joe now, yet his look had a kind of appeal.

'I must see Miss Jones. At once.'

This reply so astonished Joe that, if his chair had not had a back, he would in all probability have fallen off it. He recoiled as if the Alpenstock had been poked into his face.

'Miss Jones!' he exclaimed at length. 'Is it at this hour of the night! Sure, ye can't, man. She's in her bed this two hours.'

'I must see her. The matter is most urgent.'

'Didn't I tell you, she's asleep in her bed.'

'Then wake her. I cannot wait any longer.'

'You can't wait!' A mad idea leaped into Joe's mind. 'And for what can't you wait?'

'That is nothing to you.' The Mountaineer's eyes had a cold flash, like blue light on ice.

'Maybe it's not. But if I'm to go rousing her up at this hour, bangin' on her door, I'll want to have a reason.'

The Mountaineer considered.

'Very well,' he said. 'Since you will have to know, sooner or later . . . I have come to offer her my hand in marriage.'

'Holy God.' Joe stared at him. Then, resolutely putting all but the most immediate thought aside, he said 'Sure there's no hurry about that. That can wait till morning.'

The Mountaineer shook his head.

'Impossible, Blake. Quite impossible. I must know to-night. I cannot endure the suspense a moment longer.'

Poor devil, thought Joe suddenly. He rose, took the Mountaineer's arm, and spoke kindly.

'Look at here, Mr. Watteau, sir. You're not quite in your best fettle to-night, nor Miss Jones either. Be said by me, now. Go on home, and have a good sleep. Then, when you've had your breakfast, and shaved and spruced yourself up, come round at—at half-past ten, say: and ye shall see her all to yourself, private like, and say to her what ye have to say.'

This reasonable speech was entirely lost on the Mountaineer. He stood rigid, his arm like an iron bar.

'I must see her to-night.'

'She'll be in a black rage, roused out of her sleep. She'll refuse ye.'

The Mountaineer wavered, but only for a second.

'I trust my star. There is a tide in the affairs of men, Blake, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. Omitted, on the other hand——'

'Now look at here.'

He broke off incredulously, as a fresh burst of knocking sounded on the outer door. The Mountaineer turned, his lean neck and head pointing like a dog's. Then he looked at Joe.

'What is that?'

'That's what I'm wantin' to know,' Joe replied grimly. 'Wait now.' And he made for the door.

He opened it to admit Mr. Antrim. The ex-lawyer was badly out of breath. He appeared to be labouring under strong emotion.

'And what in the name of thunder do *you* want?'

The Mountaineer was an old friend. Joe was prepared to allow him a licence he would not grant the newcomer. He did not care for Mr. Antrim, anyhow. All that Joe knew about human beings urged him to distrust the little smooth, pink-and-white man. Only Trevannion's introduction had admitted him to the select company of the inner room.

Mr. Antrim pushed past him, making for the light in the open door of the parlour.

'Miss Jones,' he gasped, as soon as he could get his

breath. 'I must see her at once. A matter of the greatest urgency.'

So great was his agitation that he showed no surprise at the sight of the Mountaineer. One hand to his side, he stood panting, pale, distressed.

The Mountaineer, on the other hand, showed more than surprise at the sight of Mr. Antrim. He shook, he glared, and, as soon as Mr. Antrim mentioned Miss Jones, he seemed, not to swell—he was too thin for that—but to grow taller.

Joe rubbed his head in a gesture of rage and bewilderment.

'I declare to my God! is it mad yous all are to-night?'

Mr. Antrim clasped his hands together.

'I must see her. It's desperately urgent. Do you think I'd come here at this time of night if it wasn't? I've something to tell her——'

He got no further. A cry came from the Mountaineer, so strangled, so tremendous that Joe turned to gape at him. He stood, towering almost to the ceiling, furious, tall and terrible.

'What! you accursed lawyer, you mean, creeping rat! so this is what you are after all this time! You—you—the scum of the lawcourts, the hireling of pimps and tricksters—you dare pester a lady with your foul attentions! you dare pretend to her hand! Merciful Heaven, look down!' He seized his Alpenstock. 'Get out! get out! before I smash you like the slug that you are.'

Brandishing the Alpenstock, he struck at Mr. Antrim, hitting the shade of the suspended light above his head and setting it dancing madly. What followed had the visual effect of an old cinematograph film, as the swinging light threw over it irregular alternations of glare and shadow.

Mr. Antrim backed away from the attack, raising his pudgy hands to shield his head. His cries came weakly through the torrent of elocutionary scorn and abuse that streamed from the Mountaineer.

'No, no, no!' he protested. 'Nothing of the kind. Most

urgent personal message . . . I found a note at my lodgings . . . her husband.'

The Mountaineer, flailing away with his absurd, long stick, caught only a word or two of this, and all but choked with fury.

'Husband! Lodgings! A note!' he yelled. 'You dare—you stand there and reiterate to my face——'

Mr. Antrim, struck squarely on the knuckles, uttered a forlorn squeal and dived to one side, getting the table between himself and his attacker. The Mountaineer made a wild sideways slash at him and knocked a bottle and glass off the table. At this destruction Joe, who had stood motionless with astonishment, came to life and was exceedingly, angry. . . . The two of them, mad drunk, raising hell and smashing up the place!

Mr. Antrim was crouching in a corner. The Alpenstock was too long to hit at him, so the Mountaineer dropped it and fell on him bodily.

'Come out, you rat! come out, you base abominable attorney!'

Plunging forward, Joe grabbed each of them by his collar.

'Away out o' this, the two o' ye! Go on out in the street, and do your bargain' there!'

With his full strength, he hustled them to the door, and flung them out into the moonlight. He did not even stop to see where they fell, but ran back into the parlour, picked up the Alpenstock, and flung it out after them.

'And take your bloody stick along with ye!'

Mr. Antrim had scrambled to his feet and was making off, limping badly. He must have twisted his ankle in the fall. The Mountaineer was in the act of getting up. He was on all fours, and rose just as the Alpenstock fell clattering in front of him. He at once picked it up, and with a yell ran after Mr. Antrim. Joe saw the pale face turn in the moonlight, and the limping gait quicken.

'No, no, no . . .' the words came babbling back. 'A misunderstanding . . . if you'd let me explain——'

'Run, lawyer! run for your life!'

'Well, begod,' said Joe to himself, bolting the door. 'What a night! never again.'

He re-entered the parlour, and was brought up short by the sight of Miss Jones standing in the far door-way. In a dark-red dressing-gown, with her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, she looked so vulnerable, so desirable that a pang stabbed Joe's heart.

Blinking a little in the still swinging light, Miss Jones looked at the floor, the smashed glass and bottle, then at Joe. It was plain there was no thought of coquetry in her head.

'What on earth has been going on down here?' she asked. 'There was noise enough to wake the dead.'

She looked accusingly at Joe, and Joe found himself angry again.

'Only two bloody lunatics, coming in here to propose to you.'

Miss Jones stopped blinking, and stared at him.

'To propose to me?' Then, almost immediately, she asked, 'Who?'

Joe sneered. Quick enough on it, aren't ye, he thought.

'Watteau. Antrim. They're fighting now in the road. If it's the lawyer you fancy, you'd best go and protect him. Watteau's beating hell out of him with his stick.'

'Did you say Antrim?'

'Yes.'

'Antrim came here?'

'I'm just after flingin' him out. What was left of him, when the Mountaineer'd done latherin' him.'

'What did he say? What did he want?'

'I told ye, he came to propose to ye.'

She shook her head angrily.

'Don't try to be funny. Didn't he leave a message?'

'He did not. He'd no time. The Mountaineer was on him before ye could say snipe.'

She stamped her foot. 'He must have said something, or how could you think he wanted to propose? Or did you make that up?'

Her eyes were cold and hostile. Joe felt a sense of

injustice that added to his anger. Still he tried to satisfy her.

'He said, the same as Watteau, that he wanted to see you very urgent. When I asked Watteau what did he want——'

'Never mind him. What did Antrim say?'

Joe all but shouted. 'If ye won't listen, how can I tell ye! So then, when Antrim came, blathering about he wanted to see you urgent too, the Mountaineer thought it was the same thing he was after, and so did I. What else would it be? They started fighting then, and broke a bottle, so I put them out.'

'If people come to see me, it's for me to say whether I'll see them or not.'

Deciding that nothing would now mend matters, Joe hit back.

'If you'll tell your gentlemen friends to come at decent hours, no one'll hinder ye.'

The retort was lost on her. She bit her lip, and looked out into the bar, as if Mr. Antrim might still be there.

'Antrim!' She spoke half to herself. 'It must have been something important.'

'Look at here,' cried her goaded employer. 'What is all this between you and Antrim, anyway?'

As if she had forgotten him, Miss Jones now gave Joe a calculating, up-and-down glance. It had in it a business-like awareness, earned by years of fending for herself in a dangerous world, that chilled romance more effectively than any anger.

'That's my business,' she replied. 'Next time anyone calls to see me, I'll thank you to let me know. Good night.'

'Good night.'

Joe put all his anger and resentment into the two syllables. His feelings after she had gone were so bewildering that he made no effort to come to terms with them. For a long time he had wanted to get rid of the employer-employee relationship, and be on a level human footing. That had happened now, with a vengeance: and he found himself regretting the former state of affairs, so that he could assert himself, regain his authority, and put her in her place. And yet——

He got up, and walked about the room and the empty bar, alone with worse misery than he had ever imagined.

2

For Trevannion, too, the evening did not end with the posting of the eel in the Mayor's letter-box.

When, after this exploit, the party had broken up, each member expressed extreme anxiety about the ability of his companions to get home. Trevannion offered to escort first Mr. Antrim, then the Mountaineer: but these two were still fast in their unnatural amity, and refused to be parted. Not till later did he hear that the Mountaineer had seen Mr. Antrim home, and then made his way straight to 'The Peace'. At what stage in the evening he had taken his resolve Trevannion could only guess. Probably it was a sudden impulse, for the way from Mr. Antrim's to the Mountaineer's lodging would take him for nearly a quarter of a mile towards 'The Peace'. At all events, the pair of them had gone off, the Mountaineer's arm round Mr. Antrim's shoulders, and his free hand gesticulating nobly with the Alpenstock.

Trevannion then turned his attention to Stan; but the hero of the evening was arm in arm with George, and each insisted that he was taking care of the other. An inspection decided Trevannion that George was the soberer of the two.

'Take him safe back, George.'

'That I will,' George replied heartily. 'Trust me. Now then, Stan boy. Leave all to me. I'll see you right.'

Stan's face clouded with the effort of thought.

'I don't require to be seen right,' he protested amiably. 'I *am* right.'

This struck him as funny, and he laughed. George laughed too.

'Cor, Stan. You are a cure, and no mistake.'

And, laughing happily, they reeled off together.

Trevannion watched them, then turned and found Walter by his side. He had forgotten Walter.

'Well,' he said, and smiled. 'A great and notable evening. And you and I are left to take care of each other.' He

looked at Walter more carefully, and added, 'Is it all right? Will there be trouble, when you get home?'

Walter shook his head.

'Because, if you'd prefer it, I can give you a shake-down at 'The Beeches'.'

'No. Thanks very much, all the same. I said I'd be late.' He paused, and went on, 'I keep thinking of that poor brute, choking to death amongst the letters.'

Trevannion was not much interested in the eel.

'They live for hours out of water, I'm told. It will still be lively in the morning, to welcome whoever comes to clear the box.'

'I've always had a weak stomach. Couldn't enjoy what seems fun to most people. I lack our robust British sense of humour.'

'The artistic temperament, Walter. The artistic temperament.'

'A hell of a lot of good to you, if you aren't an artist.'

'You are an artist, Walter. An artist with the cue.'

'Cut it out, Trev. I'm a failure, and you know it.'

'You are the only person entitled to say that, Walter. No man is a failure unless his achievement falls short of his desires. To every man his own standard, his own values.'

'That's true. One mustn't judge others, of course. But one can judge oneself. I'm a failure all right, Trev.'

'Forgive me, Walter, but—you are not in the best state to assess things. The reaction, after such an evening as we have had—the after-effect—'

'Maybe you're right. Good night, Trev.'

'Good night, Walter.'

Walter took a few steps, then turned. 'D'you think Stan enjoyed it?'

'You are the best judge of that. You know him better than any of us. But I should have thought so. Decidedly.'

'That's all right, then. 'Night, Trev.'

'Good night.'

Trevannion looked after him, sighed, and turned for home. A not unpleasant melancholy filled him, calm and

quiet as the moonlight. Walter's words had set him thinking. The secret of contentment was not to expect too much. Keep your expectations reasonable, within the bounds of probability, and you would not be badly disappointed. Some might call that a confession of failure. They would be wrong. It was the wisdom of life itself. The one way to regulate the emotions, to ensure an equable temper, a balance. Balance, contentment: a man who had once touched the heights and the depths of feeling asked for nothing more; never to suffer any extreme again. Let joy and anguish go, those—those Siamese twins. Instead, be there balance and contentment.

He began to sing softly to himself, and only stopped as he reached the gate of 'The Beeches', and remembered that he might waken its occupants. Cautiously he unlatched the gate, and made his way round to the back. The back door key was large in his left-hand trouser-pocket: he had taken it, by arrangement with Lily, so that he might creep up the back stairs and wake nobody.

He let himself in—the key made a loud noise in the lock, but he trusted that no one would hear—and paused to take off his boots. Picking his way, he crossed the kitchen. The stove was making little murmuring noises to itself. A shaft of light from the moon, which was now getting low in the sky, fell on the shining outlines of the earthenware pot in which the porridge was made. It was delicious porridge. The thought of it, with milk and brown sugar, made his mouth water. He realised that he was hungry. No. Wait till the morning.

He made for the foot of the stair, and was just putting a foot on it, when there was a soft, rushing sound, a pair of arms were flung about his neck, and a warm, young body pressed against his own.

'Oh,' sobbed Lily. 'You've come, you've come. Thank God!'

Trevannion recoiled, borne back by surprise and by the weight of her.

'Why—Lily. My dear! Whatever in the world—you don't mean you've been waiting up for me?'

'You're safe, you're safe! thank God.'

She clung to him, burying her head on his chest. His arms were round her. Automatically, he began to stroke her hair.

'Safe? Of course I'm safe. What did you think would happen to me? We've only been having a merry evening, in honour of Stan.'

She clung tighter.

'You've been in danger,' she sobbed, 'terrible danger. Didn't you know it?'

'Danger? Nonsense, my dear. Some slight risk, perhaps, of falling into the harbour—' she gave a little cry—'into three feet of water. It might have done some of the party good. Cleared their wits a bit.'

He felt her shiver.

'You've been in very great danger,' she insisted. 'I was terrified.'

She pronounced the word with a trace of a country accent, that made it seem more poignant to him. He held her close.

'Lily, my dear, you mustn't get worried about me like this. Truly you mustn't. And all about nothing. I've had a quiet evening at 'The Peace', much like any other, only we went on longer and ended up with a bit of fishing off the pier.'

'The pier.' She shuddered. 'Oh.'

'Yes. What's frightening about that?'

'You were in danger.'

It appeared to him that Lily, once she believed something to be the fact, was as obstinate about it as most women. He changed his tack.

'How do you know that I was in danger?'

'I could feel.'

He smiled down at the top of her head, dimly visible in the half-darkness.

'You dreamed it, more like.'

She shook her head against his chest.

'I felt it, I tell you. I haven't had a wink of sleep.'

'Where was the danger?'

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She shook her head against his chest.

'I felt it, I tell you. I haven't had a wink of sleep.'

'Where was the danger?'

'Everywhere. Worst of all by the harbour.'

'Well, if that was the worst, you needn't have worried. I was quite sober enough not to fall in.'

'You can laugh as much as you like. I know you were in danger.'

'Well, if you know, you know.' Trevannion began to be conscious of their position. Suppose Miss Baggan were awake. He loosened his hold on her, and tried, gently, to step back.

Suddenly she lifted her head.

'But you're safe. You're back. Nothing matters now.'

Her breath came soft on his face, and with it her fresh warmth, as she pressed soft and strong against him. Something stirred in him, a stab of pain, a longing, something he had not felt for twenty years. Vaguely he saw her upturned face, a few inches from his own. On any other evening, such a feeling would have roused in him panic or anger. Now, in the innocence of drink, the relaxation that unloosed so many knots and troubles, he obeyed the impulse, clasped her tight, groped for her lips, and missed them. Immediately they found his.

The power of his kiss for an instant overbore Lily. Then she replied with a strength equal to his own. The embrace lasted two or three seconds only; then he let her go, and stood, shaken, gasping. Lily held him by the shoulders.

'Darling.' He was trying to steady his voice, and the word slipped out before he was aware of it. 'We'd better go to bed, if we want to be any good in the morning.'

'Yes.'

Her whisper was satisfied, appeased. She was docile again.

'You won't worry any more?'

'Not now that you're back.'

'You go up first.'

'No. We'll go together.'

'Miss Baggan——?'

'Nothing wakes her. And I came down to let you in.'

Once again he marvelled at the speed with which the most innocent of girls turns schemer.

'You mustn't worry about me, you know,' he whispered.

'I'm a big strong man. I'm accustomed to taking care of myself.'

Why on earth did you say that, he thought: and then saw, all too clearly.

Lily made no reply. Maybe she saw too. What did it matter, anyhow.

They stood for a moment at the door of his room.

'You'll go straight to sleep, won't you?' he said. 'Promise.'

'Yes.'

'Good night.'

'Good night.'

With a quick, decisive movement, she kissed him again, lightly this time, and was gone into the darkness of the stairway.

Trevannion sat on his bed, one boot on, one off, staring at the wallpaper that had so exercised Mrs. Bracegirdle. What was all this. What had he done now. His mind was a chaos.

He gave an enormous yawn, and in five minutes he was asleep.

3

A quarter of an hour later, as it seemed to him, Lily flashed into the room with his tea. Remembrance came at once, and he crouched in the bedclothes, muffling his face for fear she should kiss him, and be repelled by the stale smell of drink from his mouth.

She did not kiss him. If anything, she was out of the room faster than usual.

While he sipped his tea, Trevannion kept his mind deliberately away from what had happened. As he shaved, however, dismay began to invade his midriff. It was as if a stone had fallen into water, and sent out cold spreading rings of panic that fluttered through him. What in God's name was to happen now? Lily was in love with him. He tried to tell himself that it was nothing but the natural uprush of affection for a man old enough to be her grandfather, let alone her father; but it was no use. He knew too much about women to deceive himself. And, worst of all,

for two or three insane, unguarded seconds he had let her see the possibility of his response. He had been drunk, that was it, that was the only conceivable reason. But how could he tell her that? What a paltry thing to hide behind! She would be hurt, terribly hurt—he remembered her way of saying ‘terrified’ and groaned to himself—she could not be otherwise.

His disturbance of spirit was real, and a part of it, he saw with genuine surprise, was on Lily’s account. His own panic he recognised with contempt: but it was a form of self-contempt he had intended never to feel again. Of all blows, he had guarded himself most carefully against a blow at the heart. Old feelings, old fears, the struggling of the wounded bird . . . he groaned aloud, and went on with his shaving.

It was absurd. A man of sixty, and more, a mature man, assured, protected by a long and hard experience, with a foundling, a chit of a servant girl, a mere baby. . . . How could such a one disturb him? It was ridiculous. He had only to pull himself together, square his shoulders, assert himself, treat her with fatherly affection, laugh it off, as if nothing had happened. And, damn it all, nothing *had* happened. A kiss in the dark, to comfort a frightened child.

Liar, he said disgustedly. Can you not tell the truth even to yourself?

He scanned his face in the glass, as he wiped from it the remains of the shaving-soap. An elderly, sodden, sagging face: pouches under the eyes, skin gone slack, creases, wrinkles, discolorations. Oh, admittedly he was seeing it at its worst, on the morning after a jag, when it had no spirit, no animation, the thin hair unbrushed, the eyebrows ragged, the moustache a mere smudge of drooping bristles. When he was talking, amused, absorbed, he could, he knew from catching sight of himself in a glass, look forty or even thirty-five—in face: not in figure. But now. . . . And a young, fresh girl of eighteen, slender, with clear eyes and skin. Well; she began it. He hadn’t wished it or sought it in any way.

No, Trev? No vanity? No automatic desire to please, to

put her under an obligation, to have power, whether you intended to use it or not? How many base little depposit accounts have you banked in your time, just in case they might one day be useful? Or even for the sake of it, like a fox killing for sport?

Sourly he grimaced at his reflection. Self-analysis before breakfast was an unprofitable game. For him it was an unprofitable game at any time. Know thyself. For practical purposes, yes. Know what you could do and what you couldn't. But to go deeper, to stir up the mud—no. What's come to you, man? You haven't felt like this for years.

He was roused from these disagreeable musings by a hurried step and a knock on the door. Before he could reply, Lily burst in.

'Stan's downstairs. He wants to see you at once. He's got terrible news.'

In spite of her agitation—she was quite pale—there was in her voice a note of suppressed triumph, which Trevannion caught at once.

'*Terrible* news?'

He pulled on his old, worn silk dressing-gown, and followed her below stairs. There, in the middle of the kitchen, stood Stan, a puzzled, scared expression on his face.

'Good morning, Stan. What's this Lily tells me?'

'Mr. Antrim. Dead. In the harbour. The police say it's murder.'

'Murder!'

'Yes. Strangled, he was. And who do you think's took up for doin' it? Mount.'

'*What!*'

Stan gulped, and nodded.

'Yes. They've just took him orf.'

'Mount! but it's absurd. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Besides, he and Teddy were friends. They went off together with their arms round each other's necks. I saw them. Walter was with me. He can witness it.'

'Ar,' Stan said. 'But they fell out later, all the same.'

And he told them what he had heard of the goings on at

'The Peace'. Trevannion, who had merely stared at the account of the Mountaineer's intended proposal, shook his head vigorously when Stan came to Mr. Antrim's.

'That can't be true. He didn't go to propose to her, however drunk he was. You can rule that right out.'

'Then why should Mount have attacked him so ferocious?' Beat 'im over the 'ead with his long stick? Joe said, 'e was killin' mad.'

'He must have taken it up wrong, that's all.'

Stan was unconvinced. 'Ar, but there was wot Mr. Antrim said. Joe recalls it exact. "I got to see her most urgent," he kep' on saying. And then, when Mount started on 'im, something about 'er 'usband. Meanin' 'e wanted to be 'er 'usband, see? Why, what's wrong, Trev?'

Lily, too, uttered an exclamation of concern. Trevannion's face had taken on the mottled pallor it wore when he was mocked by the parrot.

'My God,' he said slowly. 'I see it. The fools. It was to warn her—'

He shut his mouth, staring past Stan at a grim picture. After a few seconds, during which the other two watched him anxiously, he recovered himself.

'Yes, well, Stan, thank you for bringing the news. I can tell you one thing, anyway. It wasn't Mount.'

'The last Joe seen of 'em, Mount was runnin' after Mr. Antrim, wavin' 'is stick.'

'It wasn't Mount. It was someone else. Besides—can you see Mount killing anyone? Unless he knocked the man's brains out by accident. And you say he was strangled.'

'Strangled, and threw in the harbour.'

'It wasn't Mount. The police will soon find that out.'

'I 'ope they will. The sergeant says the circumstantial evidence is very black agin 'im.'

'He'll be out before evening. No one in his senses could believe that Mount did it.'

Stan took this as a rebuke, and looked dashed, but still with an undercurrent of obstinacy.

'I 'ope you're right,' he said. 'No one could *want* to believe it.'

'No one except the police.'

'They got nothing agin Mount. Not before this.'

'No. But, when murder's done, they like to put their hands on someone. Even if they have to let him go afterwards. Make it look as if they were doing something about it.'

Stan paused.

'D'you reckon they've found out about that there eel?'

'No, Stan. I don't.'

'Well,' Stan hesitated, and looked at Lily. 'I must get on with me round. I 'ad to come and tell you, though.'

'I'm glad you did.'

Trevannion forced a smile, and Stan, with a last glance at Lily, reluctantly went out. Trevannion and Lily looked at each other.

'Do you know who did it?'

The question at first startled him. Then he reflected that it was what he would expect of this new Lily, to go straight to the point.

'Yes, Lily. I think I do.'

'What happened?' He hesitated, and she perched on the corner of the table. 'Tell me.'

As if he could not help it, he found himself telling her.

'I think what happened was. . . . How often did you see Mr. Antrim?'

'Only once or twice. No: three times, altogether.'

'What did you think of him?'

'I didn't like him. I didn't—I didn't trust him.'

'You were right,' Trevannion told her drily. 'Our precious Teddie was one of the nastiest kind of crooks. One of the very worst.'

'He gave me the shivers,' Lily said. 'What did he do? Steal? Forge things?'

'Worse. Far worse. He was a blackmailer. Do you know what that is?'

She nodded, her eyes steady on his.

'When he was a solicitor, he got to know a lot of things about people. Afterwards, he blackmailed them. I warned him he would do it once too often. I asked him if he wasn't

afraid that one of his victims would do him in. He said he wasn't. He had courage of a sort. I'll grant him that.'

'Was it one of the people he was blackmailing that killed him?'

'That I'm not sure about. Teddie knew something about the man: I do know that. If it's the man I think, he was a murderer already. And I think it must have been, or Teddie wouldn't have rushed off to see Miss Jones. Yes, that was it. Poor devil! he went to warn her.'

'Warn Miss Jones? What about?'

Trevannion looked at her. With a sudden scolding compassion, he remembered her name. He cleared his throat.

'I don't know that I ought to say it to anyone, even to you. After all, I'm only guessing. And it is a terrible thing to say about anyone, a most damaging thing. Also, in a way, it isn't mine to tell you. Because of the way I heard it.'

She nodded. 'You mean Mr. Antrim told you?'

'You're a pretty good guesser yourself.'

This is an impossible conversation, he reflected: but he was powerless to stop it, and he didn't want to.

Lily was looking deep into his eyes. Her expression was alert and thoughtful, her voice quiet.

'Tell me one thing.'

'Well?'

'You said something very damaging about Mr. Antrim, just now. You said he was a blackmailer and a crook.'

'I had the best of reasons for knowing that he was. There was no guesswork about that. Poor Teddie; it looks as if his one good act brought him his death. I believe he went to warn Miss Jones out of professional loyalty.' As Lily looked puzzled, he added, 'I can tell you that much. She had been consulting him when he was a solicitor. What an irony! I suppose even a stoat like Teddie acknowledges some kind of loyalty.'

Lily had gone very still. Her eyes were large and dark.

'You were his friend, weren't you?'

'If you can call it that.'

'You went about with him. You asked him to your house. You——'

'I never let him come here,' Trevannion said quickly.

'You took him to 'The Peace', and introduced him to Stan and all the others, and said he was your friend.'

'True. I did. I had my reasons.'

'If he was a crook and a blackmailer and all that you say'—she checked, and swallowed painfully—'how was it you had anything to do with him?'

It had come. In the couple of seconds that passed before Trevannion answered, he realised that he could not lie to Lily, that he could not even parry a question from her, and that, in some strange degree that he could not understand, it was of final importance that he should answer truly. What had wrought such a revolution in him he did not know. All he knew was that it had been going on for some time; and he saw, with surprise and with a sense of inevitable recognition, the source of all the strange feelings, the inconsistencies and changes that had been perplexing him.

Defenceless, no longer seeking to shield himself, he met her eyes.

'Because I am a crook too.'

She gave a little smile, and shook her head.

'You are a good man.'

'A good man!' he was almost angry. 'You don't know what you're saying.'

She winced at his tone, but faced him.

'I know I'm young, and I haven't seen much of the world. But there are some things I know for certain, and always have known, even when I was little. I know them because I see them. And I can see that you're good.'

'How do you judge a good man?' Trevannion asked her.

'By what he is.'

'Not by what he does? It's what he does that makes him what he is. And I haven't done a decent thing for thirty years.'

'Yes, you have. You did Stan's round, so that he could train for his fight.'

'That? I only did that to show off. And I got business from it. Insurance business.'

'You've been kind to me always, good and kind.'

'That didn't cost me anything. I can always be nice to people when it's no trouble. Besides, it pays. I never know when I may want something from them.'

Lily shook her head.

'It's no use,' she said. 'I know you like to make yourself out bad, but I can *see*.'

'A man who does bad things is a bad man. And I've done rotten things. I do them every day.'

'You're good, whatever you've done.'

'My dear child,' Trevannion cried in exasperation, 'you're just being silly. Silly and obstinate. There's nothing at all good about me. Everything to do with me is bad—including the way I get my living.'

'The insurance? What's bad about that?'

'Not all of it, I grant you. But every bit of it that I can monkey around with. Still, that's only one thing. I've other ways.'

'What are they? I've often wondered.'

'I'd be ashamed to tell you.'

'There's nothing you need be ashamed to tell me.'

'Oh, yes, there is. If you knew some of the things I did, you'd turn away from me and never speak to me again.'

'You're not to say that.' She had gone white. 'You don't know what you're saying.'

'My dear, my dear.' Trevannion's voice for the first time had a note of pain. 'It's true.'

She came to him, and put her hands on his shoulders. He was surprised by the strength and firmness of her touch.

'I love you. Nothing in the world could make me turn away from you. I don't care what you've done. I——'

She caught her voice in a sob, and her eyes swam with tears. Trevannion, deeply moved, put up a hand and clasped her wrist.

'Dear Lily.'

Then there was a movement upstairs. She sprang away from him, dashing away her tears with the back of her hand.

'I'll get your breakfast.'

'Not a word of this to Miss Balgannon. About Teddie, I mean.'

‘Of course.’

Drawing a deep breath, he composed himself to meet his hostess. Miss Balgannon looked surprised to see him in the kitchen.

‘Good morning, Miss Balgannon. A business message, from young Gummick. That is why I am trespassing.’

‘Oh, but of course, Mr. Trevannion. I am sure Lily is only too glad——’

‘May I confess to you, Miss Balgannon? I’ve been tempted before now to have my breakfast in the kitchen. It’s so cosy, so comfortable. And, now that I’m here—would you mind, Lily?’

• ‘Not at all.’

Miss Balgannon twittered, then withdrew.

‘You know,’ Trevannion said, ‘the next thing is, she’ll be wanting me to have it with her. I don’t think I could face that.’

Lily did not answer. He looked at her, and saw that her shoulders were shaking. She was crying. He sprang up.

‘Lily, darling. What is it? What have I said?’

She came to him, and let herself be comforted, like a child.

‘It— isn’t anything you—said,’ she gasped. ‘It’s—last night. I *knew* you were in danger. That man—he was after you, too.’

‘Was he, now.’ He rubbed his cheek against her hair. ‘I don’t think he was. Truly I don’t. He might have been. He just might have been. It depends what was in that parcel Teddie gave me. Yes. If he’d known I had that—and it’s what I suspect it is——’

‘There. Didn’t I tell you? I knew you were in danger.’ She shuddered. ‘And the harbour, too. I saw——’

‘What did you see?’

But she would not tell him what she saw in the harbour.

XV

TREVANNION'S prophecy that the Mountaineer would be released was soon fulfilled. He was back at 'The Peace' that same evening, shakily triumphant, a bandage around his brows, maintaining that his arrest was a futile attempt by the municipal authorities to vent their spite upon him, and apparently quite unable to realise that he had been in any sort of jeopardy. At the same time, he was obviously shocked by what had occurred. The trembling of his hands, a glazed look in his eyes, and an occasional loss of control over his voice, which rang out over-loud or collapsed breathlessly to a whisper, were due to more than the after-effects of drink.

Questioned by Joe and Trevannion, he admitted with a shame-faced smile that he had not chased Mr. Antrim very far.

'My Alpenstock in some way became entangled in my legs, and tripped me up. I seem to have struck my forehead on the cobble-stones.' He pointed to his bandage. 'When I sat up, there was no sign of the attorney.'

Fortunately for the Mountaineer, this story was supported by a young woman who, roused by the racket, looked out of her window and saw him fall. He lay, she said, for a couple of minutes like one dead, and she had been on the point of rousing her brother-in-law and sister to go and help him when, to her great relief, he sat up, put his hand to his forehead, examined his fingers, and presently clambered to his feet and went off, erratic but with purpose, in the direction of the High Street.

On the strength of this, and what they knew about his character and habits, the police let him go, after cautioning him severely and warning him that he would be called as a witness at the inquest. Trevannion, who had gone round in the morning to see what could be done, found the police sergeant sour and uncommunicative. Already convinced that they had got the wrong man, and that things were not

going to be as easy as they at first seemed, the police took a suspicious line towards everyone who knew the Mountaineer. An indignant telephone call from the Mayor, plus the difficulty of making him understand that they had more serious matters on hand than disrespectful misuse of the municipal letter-box, had not prejudiced them in favour of parties abroad and revelling the night before.

The regulars sat, discussing the whole business, a small and sober band. George, having complained of a severe headache, became so loquacious on the subject of murder in general, and so fertile in imbecile theories as to this particular murder, that Trevannion lost patience.

‘If you can’t talk sense, George,’ he cried, ‘for God’s sake keep your mouth shut.’

And even Walter added an approving murmur.

George, hurt rather than offended, eyed them mournfully.

‘I was only trying to ‘elp,’ he said.

‘Well,’ Walter told him, ‘give it a rest. Let us muddle on, in our own fatheaded way. Where’s Joe gone?’

‘I don’t know,’ Trevannion replied crossly. ‘He’s in and out like a bloody shuttle. Makes my eyes ache to watch him. Oh, here you are, Joe. Come in and sit down. You make me feel giddy, hopping up and down like a cork in a bucket. Nerves can’t stand it.’

‘Sorry. I had to help in the bar.’

‘What—is Miss Jones off colour?’

‘She’s off altogether. Not back yet. It’s not like her.’

‘I thought Thursday was her half-day?’

‘It is, so. But she asked me if she could take it this afternoon. As a favour. Seeing she was a bit upset by dint of last night, I didn’t like to say no.’

‘And she’s not back?’ Trevannion asked.

‘Not yet. What’s in your mind?’

‘You’d better ring the police, Joe. At once.’

‘The police? Is it because the girl’s late from her half-day?’

‘I mean it, Joe. It’s serious. It may be very serious indeed. Teddie Antrim didn’t come to propose to her, last night. He’d been her solicitor, for years, and he’d found

out something very important indeed. He wasn't drunk when he got here. He was as sober as I am now. If you don't get on her tracks, quick, she may end up the same as he did.'

The Mountaineer, who had been staring in bewilderment, made to rise.

'What?' he began.

Walter silenced him with a gesture. They looked at Trevannion. He was pale and determined. Joe, much wrought upon, put aside his respect as landlord and spoke with unintended candour.

'Do ye mean it, Trev? Or are ye just knowin' better, as usual?'

Trevannion was so concerned he did not appear to notice.

'I mean every word of it. If you don't ring the police, I will. The girl may be murdered, at any moment. I'm sorry—I can't tell you the whole story: but I was to some extent in Teddie's confidence. Call them up, Joe, and say she's missing.'

Joe still hesitated.

'A nice fool I'll look, telling them me barmaid is overstayin' her time off.'

'She'll overstay it for ever if you don't. Or—' his face changed, as a new thought struck him. 'Did you see her go?'

'No. Why would I?'

'You didn't see if she had any luggage with her?'

'I did not.'

'Sure she hasn't come back? She's not in her room?'

'She wasn't an hour ago. I went up the stairs and called.'

'Go up now, and see if she's taken her things with her.'

To their surprise, Joe turned crimson.

'I can't be walkin' into the girl's bedroom, and spyin' on her.'

Trevannion stared.

'Let Walter go then. Or I will. Damn it, Joe, this is a life and death matter. I tell you, the girl may be in real danger. Whoever killed Teddie has a hold over her.'

'How do you know?'

Joe was angry, stubborn. They had never seen him this way before.

'Teddie told me. Go on up, Joe, there's a good man.'

Breathing loudly, and giving him an inimical glare, Joe turned and left them. Trevannion pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. Walter was looking at him with a strange expression.

'What's been going on, Trev?' he asked quietly.

'Yes,' the Mountaineer chimed in. He had recovered something of his old hauteur. 'You owe us an explanation.'

'Don't ask me just now, Walter, there's a good man. Let's get this straight first.'

'Coo,' George said. 'It's just like a piece in *Noos of the World*.'

'It will be one, on Sunday, I've no doubt,' Walter told him.

'You really think so? Wot—in print?'

'No,' Trevannion snapped. 'They'll knit it in barbed wire, specially.'

George's face fell.

'Go on,' he said. 'You're makin' game of me.'

'Never, George. We wouldn't dare.'

They stopped, as a footstep was heard on the stairs. Joe came in, his face white, his eyes narrowed to little hard points. He looked straight at Trevannion.

'Skipped. Packed her bags, and gone. Walked out on me.' His chin came down on his chest. 'You know about this, Trev. The way it looks to me, I want an explanation from you.'

Trevannion's brows went up. Joe was walking across to him, threateningly. Joe. It was unbelievable. Walter saw it too, and uttered a low cry of surprise and warning. Both men suddenly realised the situation, and Trevannion in his amazement found time to wonder at the unpredictable vagaries of mankind. The urgency of the moment went beyond personal fear. He put up a hand, not to stop Joe from hitting him, but to make him listen.

'It's got nothing to do with me, Joe. On my honour.

Nothing at all. If you'll keep it secret, I'll tell you what Teddie told me. Promise?'

'Yes,' Walter said, and the others murmured something. Joe stood glaring, unappeased.

'I want to hear what it is.'

'Miss Jones was married.'

The Mountaineer uttered a loud, incredulous cry. Trevannion glanced at him.

'Sorry, Mount. The man was no good. He deserted her, years ago. Teddie believed she knew something about him, bad enough for her to be in real danger if he found her. Teddie knew what it was: and, if I'm right, that's why he's been killed.' He sat back, limp, sweating, and again mopped his brow. 'Now I've let it out,' he said bitterly, 'and betrayed a dead man's trust.'

There was a silence. The Mountaineer sat rigid, frozen in his anguish. Joe, still breathing noisily, stood back from Trevannion. To their amazement, the disclosure did not seem to ease his anger.

'Married, did ye say she was?'

'So Teddie said.'

Joe uttered an unprintable oath.

'That — would say anything. I wish I'd never let him cross the door.' He glowered again at Trevannion. 'It was you brought him here. Only for that, I'd have put him out.'

'I know, Joe. I'm sorry.' Trevannion sat collapsed, deflated.

'Did he know anything about you, by any chance?'

'Nothing he could prove, or I wouldn't be here now.'

Joe stared. 'Well, begod! that's honest, at any rate.'

Trevannion suddenly roused himself.

'Meantime, we're doing nothing. If you care for the girl, Joe, for God's sake call the police. Can't you see I'm telling you the truth?'

'I didn't before,' Joe said, 'but I'm apt to believe ye now.'

And he went to the office to telephone.

'Cheer up, Mount,' Walter said. 'It mayn't be true.'

But the Mountaineer seemed to know that it was.

The reaction of the police to the news of Miss Jones's disappearance removed the last of Joe's doubts. They speedily found out that she had taken a single ticket to London, where, the presumption was, she would be safe from the attentions of her husband.

Trevannion had leisure to regret his concern on her behalf. He had to go to the police station and tell the Superintendent and a Chief Inspector from the county town a great deal more than he would have wished. He managed to dissociate himself as much as possible from Mr. Antrim, whom he represented as a mere acquaintance: but this did not fit in very well with his apprehensions for Miss Jones's safety, which were hard to explain unless the mere acquaintance had told him who she was.

The Chief Inspector took a keen and lingering interest in this part of the matter.

'You say this man called upon you on his arrival in the town?' he asked, looking at Trevannion with unsympathetic light-blue eyes.

'He did. The day after he came.'

'Why? What reason did he give?'

'He told me he was in the employ of the Insurance Company for which I work. The Dycer's Bay Wid—'

'Yes. I know!'

The hell you do, thought Trevannion. He went on, 'I suppose he thought I might be able to help him.'

That, he told himself, is a really good answer. Very likely they know the whole thing. They will think that Teddie made a complete fool of me. Splendid.

For the first time since the previous evening, his spirits rose. To pit his wits against the police—not the local oafs, but this distinguished stranger—here was a sport after his own heart. There was no real danger. And his best card was still up his sleeve.

The Chief Inspector eyed him thoughtfully.

'H'm. Did he tell you the exact nature of his business for the Company?'

'He said he was making inquiries. A sort of unofficial inspector, I took him for.'

'Inquiries into what?'

'Everything, I presume.'

'Including your own activities?'

Trevannion grinned. 'I've no reason to suppose they'd be an exception. He was welcome.'

He sat easily, smiling at them. Then, judging his moment, he picked up and opened his small Gladstone bag.

'I thought I had better bring this along, in case it had any bearing on what has happened.'

And he produced the parcel which Mr. Antrim had given him to look after. He had been in two minds about this. The chance that Teddie might have left a note somewhere—it was unlikely, but just possible—weighed in favour of handing it over. On the other hand, it might contain something unpleasant about himself. This was less likely: a twister like Teddie, judging others by himself, would hardly trust him not to open the parcel, and so would not include something which could not fail to make him angry if he read it.

In his perplexity, Trevannion had consulted Lily. A week ago, to tell her would have seemed a joke, an indulgence of the child. Now, he found himself relying on her uncorrupted judgment, and hardly bothering to be surprised at himself. He was glad, too, to have an excuse for talking to her. A strange embarrassment had settled on him, making approach to her difficult.

Lily had declared at once for handing the package over. It was both wiser and his duty, she said firmly, to conceal nothing. Besides, if Mr. Antrim was the sort of man he said, then the sooner he was rid of anything that belonged to him the better.

The Chief Inspector reached out a hand, and gingerly took the package.

'You have no idea what it contains?'

'None. I can make a guess.'

'You have not opened it?'

Trevannion looked at him insolently, in reply to what he considered an insolent question.

'It was given me for safe keeping. I locked it away, and did not open the drawer from that day to this.'

'Did anyone else know you had it?'

'Ah. That's what I asked myself, more than once.' Before the Chief Inspector could continue, Trevannion rose. 'Well, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I will get on with my day's work. Should you wish to ask me any further questions, you will know where to find me.'

He went to the door, and turned round.

'I would be hardly human if I did not a little resent the attitude taken'—he looked at the local man—'by one or two of you gentlemen. You do not encourage the citizen to do his duty. After all, it was I who last night urged Blake to get in touch with you. I freely volunteered all I knew about a case in which I am in no way involved. A rather less peremptory attitude, I feel, would have been more gracious, more fitting.'

The two officers exchanged glances, and the Chief Inspector gave Trevannion a wintry smile.

'I am sorry if you feel we have been discourteous, Mr. Trevannion. The very fact that your information has been so pertinent, so valuable, has perhaps made—ah—our zeal outrun our discretion. We greatly appreciate the help you have given us. Isn't that so?'

The Superintendent forced a smile too, and Trevannion retired with the honours of the day. Rather brittle honours, he told himself, as he walked down the road. They had their ideas about him; probably knew a deal too much. He'd best be careful.

There were deeper reasons, too, for a change in his way of living. Each day he found it more difficult to face Lily. For a while he tried to get back to the old avuncular footing, to pretend that nothing had happened. It was no use. His pleasantries were laboured, unnatural. They sounded false. He felt hollow, trivial, ashamed.

Lily, on the other hand, showed no sign of embarrassment. Outwardly she behaved as usual. The only change

that might have been seen, had anyone been there who was observant enough to see it, was a veiled watchfulness. She was waiting, without urgency or impatience, for Trevannion to make the next move, a move which she knew must come. And Trevannion, longing for it, struggled with himself to make it.

It came one afternoon, nearly a week later, when Miss Balgannon was on one of her rare trips abroad, a visit to Mrs. Bracegirdle, whose wedding to the Captain was now imminent. Mrs. Bracegirdle wanted to show dear Ellen her trousseau, and dear Ellen, though not sure she wanted to see it, could think of no possible reason for refusing.

As soon as she brought Trevannion his tea, Lily knew that he was going to speak. He looked up as she came in, and pointed to a chair. There was sweat on his forehead.

'Bring yours here too, and have it with me.'

Lily shook her head. 'I have mine later.'

'Well, sit down, and keep me company.'

She sat, her hands in her lap, and looked at him. He reached for the fat brown teapot and poured out a cup. His hand shook. She made a half-moment to rise and hand him things, but he waved to her to sit where she was. He took a couple of pieces of bread and butter, put jam on one, and made a sandwich. His constraint filled the room. Lily sat, aching with love.

He took a bite of the thin sandwich, then put it all in.

'You still cut these too ladylike,' he complained. 'I have to keep on jamming them. It's hard work.'

'Shall I jam them for you?'

'No. Cut the slices thicker.'

'I did one day. Miss Balgannon saw them and was shocked.'

'Bring me the loaf, next time, and I'll cut them myself.'

'I don't know what Miss Balgannon will say.'

'To hell with Miss Balgannon.' He smiled. 'I'll fix her.'

There was a silence, in which the sounds of his eating were very loud.

'You and I have got to have a talk, Lily.'

'Yes.'

He jammed another sandwich.

'I've been thinking a lot, since the other morning.' She said nothing. 'Do you realise what you are asking me to do?'

Her eyelids gave a quick, defensive flutter.

'I'm not asking you to do anything.'

'Oh yes, you are. Not in so many words, maybe, but that's what it comes to. You remember what you said?'

She nodded, her eyes fixed on him.

'You said—you let me see that I meant a good deal to you.'

'Everything.' Her voice was low and clear. 'Everything in the world.'

Trevannion inclined his head. He could not meet her eyes.

'You said I was a good man. Wait—don't say anything yet. I told you I was not. I told you I did habitually things that were anything but good. I told you that applied to the way I get my living. I said I was a crook. You wouldn't believe me.'

'I——' She hesitated, then spoke with a rush. 'I didn't say I didn't believe you. I said I knew you were good, no matter what you did.'

'But that doesn't make sense, Lily.'

'Oh yes, it does.'

'A good man who all the time does rotten things?'

She nodded. Trevannion, smiling sadly, shook his large head from side to side.

'You can't persuade me of that, I'm afraid. And I wouldn't want you to. The world's full of people who deceive themselves in that way, all too successfully.' As she looked puzzled, he added, 'Who do rotten things, and kid themselves that all the time they are good inside.'

'It's just as silly to pretend you're bad inside. The other way round. It's—it's—I know. It's like a boy who was in the School with me. He was left-handed, and the master wouldn't let him use his left hand, and made him use his right, and he did everything badly. Then the new master came, Mr. Roberts, and he let him go back to his left hand,

and then he did everything well. What you do isn't always what you are.'

'My dear Lily, you're very ingenious at finding excuses for me: but they won't work. In any case, they don't hide the real point.' He poured out another cup of tea. 'I wish you'd have one. I don't like eating alone, with you sitting there watching me.'

'I have mine later,' she said again.

'You see—what you are asking of me—really—you are asking me to change my whole way of living. If it matters to you what sort of man I am, and if I'm to be anything like what you think—then I've got to stop doing the things you wouldn't approve of. D'you see?'

'Yes.'

He looked at her, a slow terror rising in his chest. She sat relaxed, quiet, undemanding, a child. Yet he felt that she understood perfectly what was involved, and there was in her relaxation something more inexorable than the most exacting of overt demands.

'The worst of it is that, since we talked the other morning, I haven't been able to carry on as before. I've felt damned uncomfortable. Things I've been doing all this time as a matter of course, and never thinking twice of them—I haven't been able to do them at all.' Then, as she smiled faintly, he said, 'It's serious. It's my living, my bread-and-butter.'

He looked away from her. When he resumed, it was more as if he were talking to himself.

'I don't know what's come to me, at my age, to be taking seriously what you said. What you didn't say, even. I, with all my experience, and you, little more than a child. It doesn't make sense. And yet, in some way that I don't understand, I've got to listen. Something's happened to me.'

He looked at her, as if appealing to her for an explanation. From the certainty of her untested knowledge she gave it.

'You wouldn't feel upset, if you didn't agree with me. If you didn't know it was right. If it was just me saying it, you wouldn't take any notice.'

'That's just it. At least, not quite. For some reason, I do take a lot of notice of what you say. I didn't realise that I did, but I do. Still, it wouldn't affect me so much if it didn't seem to—to correspond, somehow, with something; to ring a bell. I have the absurd feeling, Lily, that you know about me things I don't know about myself. It's too absurd. But I feel without a will of my own, I feel fated, doomed, as if I were walking in my sleep. As if I couldn't help myself.'

'Doomed!' she said, half-smiling, half-perturbed. 'You mustn't say that.'

'Lily.' His voice was very low, and he put out his hands, like a blind man. 'I don't know what's going to happen.'

She was with him in a moment, kneeling in front of his chair, taking his hands and holding them against her breast.

'You mustn't be frightened. I'll look after you. I and Miss Balgannon. You are safe here. Nothing will hurt you.'

'Leave Miss Balgannon out of it. I've no right to her goodwill. But I had no designs on you, Lily. I swear I hadn't. You know'—he looked wonderingly into her upturned face, so clear, so candid, so near to his own—'I sometimes feel that you are older than I am.'

She nodded. 'I feel that too. You said it for me. Other times—I feel a baby, and you so old and wise I'm almost frightened of you. At least—I don't think I could ever be really frightened of you.'

'You might, if you knew the sort of man I am. The sort of things I've done.'

'You're always going on about the things you've done. What are they, these dreadful things?'

'I'll have to tell you, one day.' He sighed. 'I shan't know where to begin.'

'Tell me now.'

'Get up off the floor. I can't have you catching housemaid's knee, or whatever it is.'

She got up, kissed him, and after a second's hesitation sat on his knee. He put his arms round her and held her close. She clung to him passionately, then sat, her legs apart, relaxed as a child.

'Your braces creak,' she said.

'How do you know, you shameless hussy? You have no business to know there are such things.'

'I do, though,' she answered happily. 'Mr. Murrough had them.'

'Did he now? And did his creak when you sat yourself on his knee—uninvited?'

'I never sat on his knee.'

Do Stan's creak?'

'Stan wears a belt.' She smoothed one of his eyebrows, leaning her head back, a little to one side, to see the effect. 'You were going to tell me about your awful crimes.'

'It's no laughing matter.'

'I'm not laughing.'

'I told you I didn't know where to begin.'

'Begin with the little things, then. The things you've felt uncomfortable about since last week. The things you haven't been able to do as usual. What are they? Wait a minute. You're thirsty. I'll pour you out some more tea.'

Trevannion let her pour it out. She had to stretch across him, and, as her arm brushed his face, he was aware of her once again as a woman, young and desirable.

'There.'

She gave him the cup, and, obediently, he drank.

'Your moustache is too big. It falls in.'

'They used to make special cups, with a kind of china bar across, to keep moustaches out.'

'Would you like one?'

'No, thanks.'

He wiped his moustache on his handkerchief, Lily watching every movement.

'Well. Go on. Tell me.'

'I get part of my living,' Trevannion said, 'by deceiving women. Playing up to their fears and vanities. I pretend to tell their fortunes.'

'There's no harm in that. It's a game. They like it. Old women do it at fairs.'

'Not the way I do it. I advise them in their love affairs and difficulties. I sell them love potions and lucky charms.'

I bleed them. I play on their credulity. I use their unhappiness as a means of screwing money out of them.'

'If they're as silly as that, they deserve to be made fools of.'

'Don't *you* make excuses for me,' he cried, 'after starting all this. Are you trying to undo your own work?' He stared into her face. 'I run half a dozen little petty swindles, not big enough for it to be worth anybody's while to sue me. I've preyed on women all my life. I've pretended to be fond of them for the sake of what I could get out of them.'

'That is mean,' she said gravely.

'Good. I've made you listen at last, have I? I've behaved badly to scores of women, tricked them, got things out of them.'

'Were you fond of any of them?'

'No. Often I hated them. I did it in spite, and for what I could get.'

'Did it make you happy?'

'It didn't make me unhappy.'

'Something must have made you unhappy, or you wouldn't do such things.'

'That's a better shot than you can possibly guess,' he said. A gravel-like edge had come into his voice. 'But we won't go into *that*, thank you very much. At any rate, I felt better for getting a bit of my own back. Well. Are you shocked?'

She shook her head.

'Then you ought to be.' A sharp pain rose in him, and, in anger and despair, he struck at it to make it worse. 'I *will* shock you. I'll make you turn away from me. It's no good your loving me, Lily, I'm rotten through and through. What do you think I'm doing in this house? Why do you think I came here?'

Her eyes were wide now, wide and dark. Again she shook her head. He hit out, wildly, to hurt himself and her.

'To get your mistress, Miss Balgannon. To marry her, and have her look after me. To make a slave of her. To amuse myself with her.'

In her eyes he saw a pain deeper than his own.

'Do you love her?' she whispered at last.

'Love her? I don't give a damn for her. She's a guy, a figure of fun.'

Lily covered her face with her hands, and shuddered. Her words came in a stifled murmur. He could hardly catch them.

'—to do that to her . . . to sleep in the same room and not love her—'

Brutally he caught her wrists, and pulled her hands away. She was crying.

'Now you see what sort of man I am. Now you see who it is you've been calling good.' He let go of her hands. 'Go on. Hit me. Spit at me. I deserve it.'

The words that came from her were so unexpected he could hardly believe he heard them.

'Oh, my darling. My poor darling.'

Gently she took his face between her hands, and kissed him. Then she leaned on him, her head on his shoulder.

'You need me more than I thought,' she said. 'I knew you were unhappy, but I didn't know it was as bad as that.'

Trevannion's eyes filled with tears. He held her tight, and could not speak.

Presently she disengaged herself, pulled a handkerchief from her knickers, and blew her nose.

'Well,' she said firmly. 'You shan't marry Miss Baggannon. I shan't let you marry anyone but me.'

3

After such events, it was inevitable that the wedding of Captain Higson and Mrs. Bracegirdle should be an anticlimax. Indeed, nothing proved more conclusively to Trevannion that his whole outlook on life was changed than the way in which this ceremony, which otherwise would have given him a deep and malicious delight, amused him on the surface only. What was more, at one point at least he lost his detachment, and his pleasure in mockery was swallowed up in self-dislike. True, he was able to rouse himself and give a satirical account of it to Walter and Joe, who were not among the guests: but the whole business, and the level

of life which it expressed, had in the course of a few days ceased to have any real savour for him. He felt as he had felt when, aged fifteen, he came back to a holiday spot he had last seen when he was twelve, to find all his remembered pastimes stale and meaningless, and the stream where he had fished, the Amazon of his earlier years, a shallow trickle given over to old tins and minnows. It was as if Mr. Antrim's death had been the end of an epoch, and, at his eclipse, everything associated with him had disintegrated.

At the wedding, Trevannion had, in Stan's words, a ring-side seat. To begin with, the pair were married from 'The Beeches'. Mrs. Bracegirdle, as a gesture of goodwill, had made the request of her dear Ellen, and her dear Ellen, complimented and touched, had with some trepidation acceded to it. The Captain had added his bass voice, stoutly maintaining that it was only right he should be married from the house of his old friend. Mrs. Bracegirdle had privately not been so sure about that. She had a pretty good idea that, but for her arrival, things might have gone in another direction, and she had gone so far as to suggest as much to her fiancé. The Captain had uproariously denied such a possibility.

'What!' he bellowed. 'Me fancy Ellen! Why, the poor little shrimp! All skin and bone. Nothing for a man to get hold of. *Ellen!* No such thought ever entered my head.'

'Maybe not,' the widow replied. 'But it did hers.'

'Rubbish. You're fancying things, little woman. Poor Ellen. A good thing she can't hear you.'

It was indeed. Miss Balgannon would have denied the imputation with that exaggerated violence we use when the shaft has gone to the innermost depths of the mind. Not until a real calamity had opened her eyes was she to discover that her father's old friend had a bigger place in her life than she realised.

Not yet knowing as much, she worked with all her heart to make the day go well. The parlour at 'The Beeches' was cleaned and smartened up, and turned into a positive bower of blossoms. After the wedding breakfast, a smaller, more intimate circle of friends were to return and drink a final

glass, while dear May changed into her going-away dress, and the Captain, using Trevannion's room, made such adjustments as he thought fit.

The preparation of the parlour caused Miss Balgannon a great deal of thought, and developed in her an unexpected obstinacy as to some of its details. For example, in the face of Lily's advice, and even of a few soothing remarks by Trevannion to the same effect, she insisted on having the *Collard and Collard* removed to a new and meaningless position by the fire-place. The piano looked rather indignant in its new place, but took its revenge by leaving four very bright and exasperatingly new spots of carpet where it had stood, making all the rest look badly faded. This was pointed out to Miss Balgannon, but her mouth tightened to a thin, pinched line, and she repeated that it was to stand by the fire-place.

The wedding took place, at the once-fashionable hour of eight o'clock, on a dull September morning that promised to turn fine and warm later on. It was a Monday morning, a day on which the Reverend Mr. Dilgall never felt well. This morning he felt worse than usual. His porridge had been lumpy, the water for his tea had not been boiled, and the post had brought him a letter, in courteous but frigid phrases, calling in an I.O.U. for eighty-two pounds, the balance due on the reverend gentleman's note of hand, and signed, with kind regards, his very sincerely, George Trevannion.

His discomposure was made worse by the fact that he was to conduct the service, and so must inevitably meet the said George Trevannion, who was to be best man.

This fact, the oddest feature of a very odd occasion, was entirely due to the ladies. Miss Balgannon had never got over the party with the parrot, and by repeated allusions to it had inspired in Mrs. Bracegirdle a sort of indulgent compunction towards the incident. It further happened that the question of a best man came under discussion on the very afternoon she had caught sight of Trevannion, becomingly dressed in a new suit, raising his hat and bowing to a lady of his acquaintance: undeniably a fine figure of a man. So,

when the question arose, and the Captain suggested one of his brother mariners for the post, a jovial alcoholic who, on the only occasion she met him, had attempted to pinch her behind, Mrs. Bracegirdle refused categorically, and counter-suggested Trevannion.

The resulting explosion gave the widow an excellent opportunity to test her ascendancy over her lord and master. Characteristically, she glanced at the clock just after he got back his breath and declared that he would be struck dead sooner than have the fellow in the church. Seventeen and a half minutes later, in the Captain's arms, she moved her head enough to see the time. He had, in his own phrase, struck his flag a few seconds earlier.

'After all,' he conceded magnanimously, as they resumed their separate seats, 'I owe the fella something. Cut him out. Oh yes—' as she looked up, surprised. 'He's been after you. All the time. Trust a man to see when another man's after a woman.'

Since it clearly comforted him to think this, Mrs. Bracegirdle simpered, looked down at her ring, and said nothing to upset the notion.

Trevannion, though greatly surprised by the invitation, accepted it and determined privately to put the bridegroom in the shade. At a consultation held in the parlour of 'The Beeches', a week before the wedding, he and the Captain met and shook hands ceremoniously. The one touch Trevannion allowed himself occurred in the course of the handshake, when the Captain, clearing his throat, muttered something about letting bygones be bygones, and Trevannion raised his brows, implying that he was unaware there had been any bygones but was too polite to say so. Then, lest this gesture of the old Adam imperil their new-found cordiality, he laid himself out to be most charming, and was able to be of real help to the Captain, particularly in the matter of economical catering.

'For,' he pronounced, beaming on the Captain and Mrs. Bracegirdle, 'while this is not an occasion for counting the halfpence, still there is no point in paying more than one need.'

This sentiment earned the strong approval of both bride and bridegroom. Afterwards, when the Captain was seeing Mrs. Bracegirdle home, he confessed with surprise that the 'fella had been damned civil', whereupon Mrs. Bracegirdle could not forbear to say 'There now, wasn't I right?' And the Captain, squeezing her arm, replied 'My love, you were.'

One other important matter had been discussed at the meeting, in which Trevannion and the Captain had no part. Mrs. Bracegirdle, having decided to have a bridesmaid, had the gracious idea of asking Lily: and some forty minutes had been taken up in deciding what Lily was to wear. The verdict was for a long frock in pale green, which should offset virginally Mrs. Bracegirdle's more vivid apparel. A dressmaker chosen by Mrs. Bracegirdle, who insisted on paying all expenses, produced the frock, tryings-on and all, in the space of four days: and the result delighted all three ladies.

Trevannion, in pursuance of his original design, had hired magnificent morning attire for the occasion. He was just fixing his tie when there was a knock on his door.

'Come in.'

He turned, a little stiffly—his collar was tight—and there in the door-way stood Lily, like a flower. On her hair was a wreath of artificial leaves. She looked so lovely that he caught his breath.

'Lily! 'Pon my soul.'

His obvious admiration made her eyes shine. A smile, part happiness, part mischief, quivered on her lips.

'Do I look nice? Really?'

'Nice!' he came over to her, took her by the hands, and drew her into the centre of the room. 'You do not look nice. You look magnificent. Even I did not know you could look so lovely.'

A spasm of joy passed over her face.

'I'm glad,' she said simply.

'And I? What do I look like?'

He stepped away from her, and did a portly pirouette.

'You look wonderful.'

There was no doubt about her admiration, either. She

looked at him with wide eyes of worship. He twirled absurdly on his toe, and kissed her.

'Lily. I don't deserve you.'

'Careful!' she cried. 'Don't rumple my hair.'

Trevannion uttered a shout of laughter.

'You're as bad as the rest. I've never seen anyone learn so fast.'

'Well—' she smiled again, and did not bother to go on.

'Those two certainly don't deserve you,' Trevannion continued. 'Nor me. Who are they, that we should make ourselves so splendid in their honour? The rest of their married life will be one hideous bathos after the glory of its start. Nothing in it will approach the elegance, the style, the *panache* of its inaugural ceremony.'

'Be quiet,' Lily scolded him. 'Poor things.'

'Poor things indeed. And, thank God, not our own.'

'You're not to be unkind about them,' Lily said. The allusion escaped her, but she could not mistake the tone.

'I needn't. No one need. Poor devil! fancy saddling himself with that one. And she—what does she think she's got?'

'Now——'

'What'll he take her away in? A row-boat, from the pier? Will there be a crew from one of the Company's old tubs, with an archway of crossed boat-hooks?'

He continued in this infantile vein until Lily, delighted, put a hand over his mouth. He caught her and tried to kiss her. Laughingly, she dodged, leaning back her head and pushing him away. The struggle might have gone on to the detriment of her head-dress had not Miss Balgannon's voice come shrilly through the half-open door. She was in difficulties with a hook at the back, and required Lily's aid.

The morning, which had dawned fine, became overcast, and it was dark and blustery as the big bell of St. Asaph's rang, and the Reverend Mr. Dilgall donned his surplice in the draughty vestry.

The bell was by no means musical. Trevannion had once likened it to the beating of a cracked frying-pan with a spoon, and, except that at close quarters the bell sounded louder and more penetrating, his description was not

unjust. Mr. Dilgall had for acolytes one Master Morley, the albino nephew of Mrs. Wishart, Trevannion's former landlady; and the thinly disguised messenger-boy from Murrough's the grocer's. This youth had a swelling on one side of his face, which his mother had diagnosed as incipient mumps and his father as a gumboil: while Master Morley suffered from a grievance in the shape of a pair of blue glasses, summarily placed on his nose on the previous afternoon by the new dispensary doctor, through which he surveyed a novel and unpleasing world of foggy ultramarine. His aunt, on the strength of his presence, had taken up a strategic position midway in the church. She wore a garment of tired brown velvet adorned with a battery of jet buttons, and a cameo brooch, and returned Trevannion's surprised glance with a malignant stare. He noticed that she had left her fishing-net at home, and was troubled by a mischievous desire to tell her so, which, fortunately perhaps, remained ungratified. The little Wisharts had been left at home too, probably as a punishment, since they would have been all agog to come. A small and shambling crowd of Dycer's Bay derelicts, the unemployed and unemployable, had gathered outside and raised a ragged cheer when the bride's car drove up. With her was the most reputable of the Captain's fellow-mariners, whose function was to give her away.

Trevannion and Lily far outshone the rest of those present, but that was not difficult. The bride, for some reason, was not looking her best. She seemed ornate, overdressed, and unexpectedly red in the face. The Captain in his uniform looked like an actor a little overplaying the part of an elderly sea-captain on a public occasion: but, as Trevannion said afterwards to Walter and Joe, he always looked like that. He *was* like that. Half the things he said were so much in character one could hardly believe he had said them. Only in occasional non-typical utterances did the differentiated man pop out; disconcertingly, as often as not.

Miss Balgannon was dressed becomingly, and looked what she was, a maiden lady of retiring disposition and modest demeanour. Of the others, the most conspicuous included

a few for whose presence no one could very clearly account. Two nautical friends of the Captain, who exchanged hoarse and disquieting whispers during the ceremony, and more than once shook with wheezy laughter, had presumably come to support their colleague. There was a nephew by marriage of the Captain's, a shy young man in a stiff serge suit, who, as the only relative, came back to 'The Beeches' afterwards and would not have spoken to a soul had Trevannion not sought him out and plied him with sherry: but he had been invited. There was a thin clean-shaven clergyman, disclaimed by all, and a gentleman purporting to be the uncle of someone or other, whom no one remembered having seen before, and in whose vicinity hovered a persistent smell of cloves.

Elocution was not among Mr. Dilgall's professional assets, and he faltered and stumbled more than once in the course of the ceremony. He made one or two ingratiating attempts to catch Trevannion's eye, and received in return a cold bow which brought him out in a sweat. He had not the eighty-two pounds, nor anything like it, and his apprehensive recollection of this fact took his mind off his work. At one stage he became so breathless, and was forced to make such long pauses, that the Captain bellowed 'I will' too soon, received an admonitory dig from his bride, who began to giggle, and had to be given a second dig, to make him say it again, in the right place.

Trevannion did not mention the parson's indebtedness to him in his account to Joe and Walter, but by the time he reached the end of the service, he was well away.

'The scene in the vestry afterwards was on the same high plane,' he told them. 'When they came to sign the register, Mrs. Bracegirdle was afflicted with a second fit of the giggles, possibly due to her overhearing some nautical pleasantry from the posse of retired master mariners who insisted on crowding in with us.'

'What was it?'

'I didn't catch it. An allusion to backstays, I believe. At all events, she was laughing so much as she signed that her signature will much perplex any future student of history

whose researches may lead him to peruse the book. The Captain signed in log-book fashion, and was with difficulty dissuaded from adding a note about the weather and the direction of the wind.

'Then he kissed the bride and Lily and Miss Balgannon. If Mrs. Wishart had been there, I am sure he'd have kissed her too. The mysterious uncle kissed them as well, and, seeing that the master mariners were lining up——'

'You kissed them too.'

'I could do no less, Walter. I could do no less. I then hurried them out of the vestry, just in time. I hastily squared the vicar, and, as we left, the uncle broke into song, asking someone to provide him with a bunch of blue ribbon, which it seemed he required to tie up his bonny brown hair.'

'Get out, Trev.'

'Gospel, Walter. Gospel truth. You know me too well to believe that I would exaggerate.'

Joe uttered a short guffaw, like a dog's bark. His brief quarrel with Trevannion had been amicably buried days before.

'Did he get to the breakfast, this lad?'

'Did he get to the breakfast! He'd get to forty breakfasts. If we'd gone a hundred miles by express train, we'd have found him sitting there when we arrived. Doesn't your experience as a publican tell you that?'

'Oh, begod, you're right. I know that sort well.'

'This time he wasn't actually in front of us. He arrived ten minutes after us, in old Daly's cab. We were to hear more of him, too. The subsequent refreshments seemed to sober him up. But don't let me get ahead of myself. The Captain's friends gathered together at the foot of the table, and made a kind of cabal, uttering husky and audible criticisms of the arrangements. It appeared they considered the meal might have been a shade more robust, a little less arid, in the matter of bottles and decanters.'

'Aha,' Joe said.

'There was a young man from the Insurance Office. I don't know how the hell he got there: I didn't see him at

the Church. He was nothing to do with me, anyway. He couldn't take his eyes off Lily. He sat there adoring her, and hastening to praise the looks of the bride every time anyone spoke to him. This he seemed to think would put matters straight.

'We had just got to the stage when people began to look at each other and wonder who was to make the first speech——'

'What, with you there, Trev?'

Trevannion waved this aside.

'——when, to everyone's surprise, up rose the mysterious uncle. To this hour I don't know who he was, how he knew the bride or bridegroom, or what he was doing at the ceremony. Anyway, he made a speech the like of which I never heard in a long experience, and couldn't even memorise for a future occasion. He had a wonderful flow, and every now and then it took him some distance from the subject in hand: but he coupled it with a capacity for drinking a toast every two minutes, and so he was always able in the interval to get back again. For example, the company may have wondered what connection the ordinary shares of the Dycer's Bay Widows' and Orphans' Assurance Company at seventy-three-and-a-quarter had with the nuptial feast at which we were assisting, but we were not left to wonder long. A toast restored us.

'This speech delighted the company. Perplexity at the divagations was lost in admiration of the eloquence. As to the divagations'—Trevannion's face took on an abstracted expression—'the discovery, three hours later, by Miss Lily Newton, of the orator asleep against the kitchen-dresser at 'The Beeches'—for, I need hardly tell you, he made the last lap too—may possibly shed some light on the variable nature of his discourse.'

'It may,' agreed Joe.

'But I am running ahead again. The speech of the mysterious uncle was so comprehensive, it touched life at so many points, if I may put it that way, that any further speech of congratulation seemed superfluous.'

'Don't tell us you never spoke, Trev.'

'I refrained, Walter. I refrained. At least, while I was debating with myself what to do—since, after such an oration, anything I could say would be an ant-climax—the gallant Captain took the decision out of my hands by rising to reply. I confess that I was relieved.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Those are churlish words, Walter. Here am I trying to give you an accurate report, taxing my memory——'

'Your imagination, you mean.'

—'to regale you with the facts of an occasion which I attended and you didn't: and you accuse me of mendacity.'

'Go on,' Joe prompted him. 'What did the old lad say?'

'The Captain,' Trevannion said, 'made a characteristic and dignified reply. He had a full cargo in the fore and aft hatches, was in excellent trim, and his speech captured the appreciation of all present. I cannot claim to give it to you verbatim, but to the best of my recollection it ran as follows.'

He rose, assumed a constipated expression, and in a voice remarkably like the Captain's he harangued them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, my darling heart here beside me, Miss Balgannon, Mr. Trevannion, Miss Lily, and all kind friends here assembled. I have only a few words to say, and I will say them as quickly as I can, and while I can. I wish to all present no better future than has happened to me: to find a helpmate and companion with the best of prospects, and maybe someone to carry on their name in decent honour, if not in glory."

'That was handsome,' Walter remarked, 'seeing he has little hope of such a thing himself.'

'I wouldn't put it past him, or her. However.' He resumed the Captain's wooden stance and stockish gaze.

"There are many friends assembled here, whom to know is to love. I drink to your future, and as I'm at it and nigh my Plimsoil Line, I drink also to my dear one, her who in the hearing of you all has agreed to pilot me until our ship reach the last port of earthly call. I hope, when she and I are settled in some secure haven, to have you all to see us from time to time. So here's to you all, my dear friends and

my darling, and every time we meet again may we be as happy as we are to-day, until the morning when we meet in the Presence of our Great Admiral, the God of us all.”’

Walter's ready eyes had moistened. There was a silence as Trevannion finished.

‘You done that well, Trev.’ said Joe. ‘That’s the way he talks. When he’s sober, anyways.’

‘He’s more than ever like it when he’s drunk,’ Trevannion said. ‘All applauded this speech, except the nondescript clergyman, who coughed and looked reproachful, as if the Captain had encroached on his prerogative. Starting back to ‘The Beeches’, we found a sort of overflow meeting outside, waiting for largesse. Mrs. Wishart’s nephew made half a crown, and the grocer’s boy five shillings—a superior sum due, I am sure, to his commercial experience. It always tells.’

He broke off, and drank what was left in his glass. It tasted flat and bitter. His mind felt flat and bitter as the drink. The momentary lift of making a story and amusing the others left him, and he felt a weariness, a disgust with the whole thing, and the life of which it was part. Uneasily, too, he felt that in imitating the Captain he had been making fun of an honest man. His voice had warmed, and a tingle had run up his spine as, with his actor’s response, he had tuned in to the truth of feeling beneath the Captain’s words. Agh! disgust for himself and all that was sordid and unworthy in his life rose like bile. His soul felt like a room the morning after a debauch, stale with shut windows and the smell of drink and tobacco smoke.

As soon as he decently could, he made an excuse and went home. There was only one person who could comfort him now.

XVI

WHEN THE rebirth which is popularly called conversion happens suddenly, its early stages have been occult. The inner life of the victim has been approaching the crucial event, unknown to his outer self. Long before the outer self is aware, the inner has grown dissatisfied, and longed for the vital change. So, when the turning point is reached, the inner self imperatively takes charge, and there is a sudden, sometimes an almost painless revolution.

More commonly the process is gradual, and attended by the pangs of birth. The sufferer struggles and cries: all his accumulated worldly wisdom resists the command. Only when exhaustion falls may the inner self sigh with relief, and accept what can be resisted no longer. Trevannion, though, once he knew of it, the process happened quickly, suffered pains of increasing depth and intensity. Anger and impatience gave way to bewilderment, bewilderment to a determination to undergo, which was really an attempt of his old self to take charge again, and, when this in turn broke down, to a restless misery that by degrees melted to pure suffering.

The sense of being doomed, of which he complained to Lily at the start, did not prevent him from putting up a tortured and devious resistance. For such resistance he was well equipped. The worldly practice of a lifetime, an innate though disguised conservatism, and the resources of a quick intelligence fought to preserve everything that had been deliberately accumulated for provision and defence. He insisted that he was succumbing to the one fault he had thought himself safe from, the sticky sentimentality of middle age, its fatuous adoration of immaturity. He cried that it was mad to fling away, on an impulse, all that experience had taught him. He taunted himself with doing the very thing he had mocked in others. He shivered, and said it was too late to change. He pretended he was older than he was, and remembered the bitter things he had said in the

past about death-bed repentance. He bade himself review the whole situation, and asked what sense there could be in handing over the course and conduct of his life to the caprice of a little domestic servant, a foundling who knew nothing of the world. He shook with cold panic at the thought of facing a way of life which he had not designed and so could not control. Money, too: how was he to live? His honest sources of income would not be enough. And, strongest of all, crucial question: his thoughts, his actions, the way he lived were what life itself had taught him. They were the willed result of first-hand experience. Were they to be falsified in a few weeks by the inexperience of a child?

Yet, all the time he was reasoning with himself, he knew that there was no escape. The final surrender was certain, and part of him willed it. And this part, this new, awakened part had a helpless strength which was like the force of gravity, persistent and inescapable. It found an ally in the fact that he was not yet called upon to do anything. He need not leave 'The Beeches', he need not undertake any new work, he need make no decisions. All he had to do was to relax, to surrender, to let the tide of feeling flow, to leave all in Lily's hands.

One thing only was needed to complete the assault upon his citadel; and it was not withheld. Clumsily, with anguish and groping wonder, he fell in love. This new emotion drowned everything he had hitherto felt for Lily. It covered even, for a while, the valuation of her as ardent and bodily desirable. It was an ache, a longing, a profound bewilderment, a dependence so great that, when he was not with her, it seemed he could not properly fill his lungs. Her presence became necessary to him as food and drink. He could not live without her, and, murmuring this to himself, he realised with a bruised amazement how a phrase can be glibly used a thousand times before we take its meaning. The man who had spoken often of love saw now that he had never known what it meant. Having desired and achieved a score of women, he lost sight of desire in his agonised feeling for the integrity of this girl who would refuse him nothing. For the first time, in a distress of spirit that made him lie

gasping in the darkness, he gave sovereignty to another and ceased to be the centre of his world.

In the birth-pangs of this new order of experience Lily could do little to help him. Having no such gulf to bridge, loving as naturally as a bird sings, she could see his suffering and be grieved without understanding what it was about. Trevannion did his best to tell her what was happening to him, he sought her help and her sympathy. She gave him her sympathy, as if he had toothache, but in spite of her instinctive wisdom she could come no nearer to the causes of his pain. Her wisdom taught her that it was good, she rejoiced that he could no longer do the things of which he had grown ashamed, and she waited, in a frame of mind that varied from timid distress to something near impatience, for him to settle into the happiness which she reckoned should go with a change for the better. If Lily was simple, it was not because she was stupid, but because to her the main issues of life had always been simply presented. Her nature, as Trevannion one evening described it to her, was like a mine where three or four borings ran deep to the pure ore of certainty: but they were not interconnected. There was no complexity. Nothing was as simple as she believed, but her few certainties were truth itself.

Lily listened, a frown on her face, seeing clearly the picture he drew, and nodding gravely as he had finished.

'Yes,' she said. 'I think that's true. About me, I mean. I don't know. It's so hard to know. I only know how I feel and how things seem to me. But I still don't see'—she raised her head, and looked direct at him—'why you always say things aren't simple. I believe they are. I believe they ought to be, they're meant to be, and the reason the world gets into such trouble is that people won't admit they are, and insist on adding them up and making them complicated.'

Trevannion sighed. He sat back, a hand on each knee, looking at her fondly.

'Look at you and me,' she went on. 'We're quite simple. There's nothing complicated about us. I love you, you love me. Here we are, living in the same house, where I can see you every day and look after you, and you can come and

talk to me whenever you want to. It's only when you start to wonder and make up theories and fuss about things, that they get complicated.'

'Don't call me child.'

'Get out. You like it.'

'I don't.' She was smiling. 'At least, I do, really. But I oughtn't—you oughtn't. The way you say it, it's rude.'

'No, it isn't.'

'Yes, it is. It means I'm too young to talk sense, and you're my grown-up uncle.'

'I don't feel a bit like your grown-up uncle.'

'Then don't talk like him.'

'I'm not. Who is he, anyway?'

'I haven't got one.'

'Well then——'

They laughed, but Trevannion quickly was serious again.

'Yes, but Lily, there *are* complications. Number one: her ladyship upstairs.'

Lily's face became thoughtful too. Miss Balgannon showed signs of becoming a nuisance. Like so many people who never allow themselves to realise what is going on, much less put it into words, she began to behave in a way suggesting that a part of her divined what was in the wind. She developed a tendency to send for Lily at odd moments in the day, to come into the kitchen, to prowling about the house, and even once or twice to knock on Trevannion's sitting-room door and come twittering in upon some very transparent pretext. A couple of days after finding him taking tea with Lily downstairs, she revived the idea that Trevannion and she should have meals together. Trevannion side-stepped this proposal with the same urbanity he had shown when she surprised them in the kitchen. She got no change out of him at all. But she was obviously restless, and, so far as one of her nature could be, she seemed suspicious: and Trevannion saw quite well that her suspicions must one day come into the open.

Lily had felt the change in her mistress, but was inclined to make little of it.

'She's fond of you,' she told Trevannion. 'She's in love with you, I think—though she doesn't know it, of course.'

'Why "of course"? She's not altogether a fool.'

'It would be so forward to be in love with a gentleman who'd never said anything to her about it.'

'She'll find out, sooner or later.'

'Well, wait till she does. You spend half your time worrying about things that haven't happened. I don't see any sense in that. They never may.'

Trevannion smiled. 'You forget I'm an insurance agent.'

All the same, the situation was getting more and more difficult. Trevannion's way of countering it was the typical one of refusing to admit to Miss Balgannon that there was anything out of the ordinary in his seeking Lily's company. Once he pretended that he and Lily were doing a puzzle together, and invited Miss Balgannon to join them. Then, a few days later, he drew Miss Balgannon aside, and explained to her, in fatherly tones, that he was concerned to see Lily getting so little company.

'I tell her she ought to go about more, and be with young people of her own age, Miss Balgannon. But she doesn't seem to fancy them. She has young Gummick, of course: but—Well. If she won't, she won't. We must see what you and I can do. One thing is certain, we can't leave the poor child alone all day.'

Miss Balgannon, blinking, agreed that, indeed, they could not. The effect of this speech was to throw her into a confused, a guilty frame of mind. The idea that Lily was not getting all that a young girl required had never occurred to her. Brought up herself among older people, she would have thought the same thing natural for Lily, if she had thought about it at all. Now, convicted of thoughtlessness, she was uneasy, and her manner towards Lily became more equivocal than ever.

But Trevannion's frontal attack, while it may have stoppered her down in one way, did not at all suppress her unconscious vigilance. She continued to prowl, and to call for Lily at times which hitherto had been free in the kitchen. An afternoon came when she all but surprised them in each

other's arms. Lily sprang away, and Trevannion, to whom such incidents had once been all in the day's work, mahaged very rapidly to get into a sedate and uncompromising attitude: but, as he told Lily afterwards, it was the atmosphere which mattered on such occasions, and he felt sure that Miss Balgannon had tuned in to it.

He sat, an unpleasant smile on his face, and began to hum. Lily looked up sharply.

'What an ugly noise!' she exclaimed. 'Do stop it.'

Caught out, confused, he turned to her.

'Yes,' he said. 'I must.'

'You looked horrid,' she rebuked him. 'Whatever possessed you!'

'Out of the mouths'—His face had an expression she could not read. 'You speak wiser than you know, my sweet.'

'How do you mean?'

'When you said, whatever possessed me. Something did possess me.'

'Well,' she said, 'send it packing.'

'I will. At least, I'll try. How queer!'

'What's queer?'

'That I should catch myself at it, after all these years.'

'At what?'

'Making that noise.'

'Was it a habit of yours? I should think whoever was with you must have had something to say.'

'No,' Trevannion said. 'She said nothing.'

'Well,' Lily told him, 'I would have, double quick. Was she deaf? Didn't she mind? Who was she, anyway?'

'She minded a lot. And she was anything but deaf.' He was speaking with difficulty. 'She was my wife.'

Lily came across to him, and took his hand.

'Tell me about her.'

'She was very neat and little and tidy. Everything about her was neat. She never had a hair out of place.'

'Was she pretty?'

'Yes—in a small, regular sort of way. I married her when—Oh,' he sighed impatiently—'We'd both been hurt, I was pigging it in lodgings, and was sick of it: she was lonely,

and we thought we'd look after each other. It didn't work. She had a mania for tidiness. I liked it for a few months, then it drove me mad. She was so civilised. She was always attending to herself. She put cream and things on her face at night. If I wanted to make love to her, it was always a disturbance, it upset some of her preparations. She had no spontaneity. There was nothing natural about her. She wouldn't walk if she could take a train or a bus. It was purgatory to her to sweat. She edited herself, and she edited life. It brought out the worst in me. I began to torment her, to leave things about, to be coarse. I belched at meals.'

He broke off in surprise, for Lily was trying not to giggle.

'It wasn't funny,' he said reprovingly.

'I—I'm sorry.' She stuffed her hand over her mouth. 'I can't help it.'

'You are a baby,' he said, and kissed her. 'It wasn't funny at all, though, because it was done to hurt. She had a very pretty little singing voice, small, very true, like a bird's, and she used to sing about the house. Her ear was very delicate. I had a good voice in those days,' he went on with a note of complacency. 'It was a bit loud for her, but she used to like it if I just hummed or sang quietly. There were some sounds she hated.'

'What sort of sounds?' Lily encouraged him, as he broke off. 'Loud sounds? Engine whistles, and things like that?'

He looked at her, startled.

'Oh yes, she hated loud noises of any kind. But I didn't mean that. I meant vowel sounds. She hated any sound with a short "u" in it. I found out, because I called her "Bunch" and "Bundle". One day she gave a little shiver, and when I asked her what was the matter, she said she couldn't stand that sound. Words like "bug" and "clutch" gave her a squirm down the back.'

'She must have got a lot of squirms down the back.'

'She did, poor dear. She didn't notice them so much in ordinary conversation: she hardly could. It was when they were by themselves. That was why she couldn't bear to be called any name with that sound in it.'

‘What *was* her name?’

‘Elaine.’ He passed his tongue over his lips. ‘So what I used to do, to torment her, when she got on my nerves, I used to make up all the ugliest syllables I could, with that sound in them, and a few others I’d learned she didn’t like, and sing them to the tune of her favourite songs!’

‘Oh, the poor dear!’ Lily covered her face with her hands. ‘Didn’t she go mad? Didn’t she hit you with the poker?’

‘She never batted an eyelid. She was far too proud to let me see I was hurting her. She used to pretend not to notice.’

‘But it must have been torture! And, worst of all, to know you were doing it on purpose.’

He bowed his head. ‘Now you see the sort of man I am.’

She looked at him, in severe wonder, as at a naughty child. Still bent on self-revelation, he raised his head again.

‘Once or twice, when someone has annoyed me, I’ve caught myself humming like that, making those noises. When I was planning counter-measures.’

‘And so you began it just now because you were thinking of something unkind to do to poor Miss Balgannon?’

‘Probably.’

‘Well,’ she said firmly. ‘You’re not to. I won’t have it. What harm has she done to you?’

‘None. I was only thinking how we could circumvent her if she goes on being a nuisance.’

She kissed the top of his head.

‘You’re spoilt, that’s what you are. Two women, ready to do anything you want.’

Trevannion smirked. Often, he could find no answer to Lily. His flow of words deserted him. It seemed to be a property of the old Trevannion: the new self could not command it, or rather, it was no use to him. It was like an instrument he could no longer play, an instrument belonging to a combination in which he no longer had a part. The simplicity of his feelings could not be expressed by means of it. Instead, his speech with Lily was often clumsy and halting, as experimental as the feelings it tried to utter.

At ‘The Peace’, he felt no hindrance: but a change of

feeling was noticeable here too. The malice and animosity which had inspired so much of his talk seemed to have collapsed, throwing out of work a whole vocabulary of denigration. Trevannion still talked, and made fun, and set the others laughing: but there was a new quality in his talk, a warmth, a relaxation, awkward at first, but growing on him as the days went by. Walter noticed it at once, and was not long in suspecting the cause. Even he, however, did not guess the full extent of what was happening. He thought that the gentle atmosphere of 'The Beeches', the contrast between it and Mrs. Wishart's was having a humanising effect. He noted a change in Trevannion's facial expression, a change hard to put into words. One would not have said, in the old days, that his face looked strained, yet now it looked as if a strain had been removed. And, once or twice, something in the man seemed to glow. At other times, there was a new kind of complacency about him, the sleek, well-fed look of a household pet, which Walter accepted as inevitable, but did not like so well.

After sitting for a couple of minutes silent over her sewing, Lily looked up, not at Trevannion, but at the busy wall-wagger clock.

'What happened to her?'

Trevannion came to with a jerk. He had been far away.

'Her? Oh, Elaine. Poor girl. She stuck it for nearly three years. Then she walked out.'

'And then——?'

'I took up with someone else, and she divorced me.'

Lily bit a thread.

'Are you still married?'

'Lord, no!'

She let out a long breath.

'That's all right, then.'

He smiled at her. 'Would you be jealous?'

'Don't be silly.'

'I suppose I'm flattering myself. An old man like me.'

She frowned. 'Now you *are* being silly. Really silly.'

'Well, when I say——'

'You needn't pretend not to understand. It's a waste of

time saying things when you know the answer. Or just to make me say something.'

'I expect I'm being very stupid,' Trevannion said, after a pause. 'But, if you wouldn't be jealous, I can't see what odds it makes whether I'm married or not. How could I be, anyway, when I told you I had planned to marry Miss. Balgannon?'

He jerked his thumb towards the room above. Lily's reply took him aback.

'I thought maybe you mightn't worry about a thing like that. Or else that you said "marry" so as not to shock me.'

'Pon my word, Lily! No: I meant it literally. My intentions towards your dear mistress were what the world quaintly describes as honourable. I am unencumbered.'

'Good.'

'You like to have me all to yourself, do you?'

'Of course.' She paused, and then said deliberately, 'You'll have to do it sooner or later, so you may as well make up your mind.'

He stared. 'Do what?'

'Marry me.' She bit another thread. 'There. Now are you satisfied? You'd been trying to make me say it for I don't know how long.'

The room to Trevannion seemed full both of silence and noise. A wave of panic unbelief rose in him, followed by more waves, so violent, so contradictory he could hardly breathe.

'Lily!' he got out at last. 'You don't know what you're saying.'

'Oh yes, I do.' She spoke as calmly and practically as if it were something in the housework. 'So do you, only you're being silly.'

'But—how could I marry you?'

'Why not? You're not married to anyone else. Neither am I.'

'Child! do you know what being married means?'

She was threading her needle. He saw with amazement that her hand was steady.

'Better than you, by all accounts, with your ugly noises

and doing all you could to make the poor girl miserable.' She pulled the thread through. 'You do think I'm a baby, don't you?'

'You're proving it to me, with every word you say.'

'I'm talking perfect sense,' she retorted. 'It's you who don't see a thing till it's shoved under your nose. You said you were twisty, and you are. You nag on at me till you make me say a thing, and then you pretend to be surprised at it. That's what I call silly. Sillier than anything I do.'

'You talk about things by their names,' cried the harassed man, 'and they're not the real things at all.'

She looked up quickly.

'Why do you say that? It's exactly what you do. Why do you put it on to me?'

'Because you talk like a baby, without knowing what you're talking about. Because you talk of getting married as if it were like going out and buying a bun. Because—oh, this is a perfectly impossible conversation!'

He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his neck. The greater his excitement, the calmer Lily became.

'There's nothing at all impossible about it. Or about getting married. If two people are free, and want to get married, what's to stop them?'

'Several things, when one is eighteen and the other sixty. What would people say to me?'

'What does that matter? You've never been one to worry about that. You told me so yourself.'

'They'd say I took advantage of your youth and inexperience. That you were too young to know your own mind.'

'You'd know it wasn't true.'

'Would I, though.'

She looked at him with sudden anger: but before she could speak he hurried on. 'Besides, you don't appear to realise that if you're under age, you have to get leave to be married. Who's to give it to you? We don't know where your parents are. Who else is there?'

She hesitated. 'There's Miss Baggan.''

'Who you say is in love with me herself.'

'She'd—she'd——' Lily frowned, and faltered. Then she

recovered herself. 'I've read in the papers of people getting leave from the courts. That would be it.' Her voice brightened. 'I'd get leave that way.'

'They wouldn't give it to you. Not to be married to me. If it was Stan, now——'

'Poor Stan,' she said. Then, laying down her sewing, she looked at him directly. 'You talk as if you didn't want me to marry you. Don't you?'

'Lily . . . it isn't that. You don't understand. Oh, God!'

Gently she got up and came to him.

'There now. You're not to fuss yourself. Would you like me to make you some more tea?'

Trevannion sat back with a sigh. There was nothing he could say.

2

The room at 'The Peace' was empty, except for Walter, who was practising shots in a desultory way at the table. He looked up, as the door opened.

'Hullo, Trev. You're early.'

'Yes,' Trevannion said. He sat down and watched Walter for a couple of minutes. Then, catching his eye, he gave a forced smile.

'You're a man of the world, Walter. Advise me, like a good chap. I'm in a jam.'

Inwardly, Walter whistled with surprise. Trev asking advice! this was something new, and no mistake.

He put away the rest which he had been using, replaced his cue in its socket, and came across to where Trevannion was sitting.

'I'm no Solomon,' he said. 'But I'm at your service.'

Having come to the point, Trevannion found himself unable to tell him the full truth.

'You know I've been for some time living at 'The Beeches'.'

Walter nodded. His surprise grew. He never remembered having seen Trevannion embarrassed.

'Well—I fear I shall have to leave.' Trevannion smiled half-heartedly, and looked away. 'Two women in the house, and they're both getting fond of me——'

Walter was about to say what sprang at once to his mind, that such a situation should suit Trev perfectly, but he checked the impulse.

'Does that matter?' he asked. 'Isn't it a very natural thing?'

'It may be natural, but it's deuced uncomfortable. I don't want to be a cause of contention, and upset a peaceful household.'

'But need you?'

'That's what I want to consult you about.' He gave Walter a quick glance. 'You may think it's just my conceit, and that I'm imagining it, but I'm afraid it's true.'

There was a silence. Walter looked at the large profile, the face fleshy but still handsome, and, with its new expression, in a strange way appealing. If Trev had been attractive to women before, from the heights of his self-sufficiency, he would play hell with them now that he looked vulnerable and in need of care.

'Mind if I ask a personal question, Trev?'

'Not a bit.'

'Are you fond of either of them?'

Trevannion did not answer at once, and for a second or two Walter feared he had offended him.

'Of one—yes, Walter. You shame me. I should have told you that to begin with.'

'May I ask which?'

The reply cost Trevannion an even greater effort.

'The young one. Lily Newton.'

'I see.'

For a time neither spoke. Walter, in his effort to meet the call made upon him, tried to empty his mind of all he previously knew about Trevannion, and see only the man before him. When he began to speak, the sound of his own voice almost made him jump.

'If you don't mind my saying it, Trev, I've noticed a great change in you lately. I thought it was just the comfort of your new place, and having people to look after you properly. I didn't get on to—to what you've just told me.'

Trevannion cleared his throat.

'You say a change, Walter. May I ask if you think it a change for the better, or for the worse?'

'For the better, Trev. Decidedly.'

'Thank you, Walter. It is very important to me to know that. You see, I wondered if perhaps—at my age—I might be going to pieces. Going soft.'

Walter smiled. 'You can afford to go soft a little, Trev.'

Trevannion smiled back, frankly, and with relief.

'What am I to do, Walter? The older lady is beginning to realise what's happening. Once she knows for certain—well, things may be very awkward.'

'What is Miss Newton's attitude?'

'That's the worst of it, Walter. I can't get her to take it seriously. She——'

'I thought you said she was fond of you.'

'She is,' Trevannion's eyes were round. 'She wants me to marry her.'

'That seems to be taking it seriously, Trev.'

'Yes, but, damn it all, Walter, she's only eighteen, she's a foundling, she knows nothing of sex and of the world, she's never had a father, there's been no man in her life——'

'Stan,' Walter put in.

'Stan! she doesn't look on Stan as a man. She's a hundred years older than Stan. Anyway, he treats her like a maiden aunt. She has no one to take her affection. I come along, she pours it all out on me, and then thinks she's in love with me and we ought to get married.'

'She may be in love with you.'

'What would you say, Walter, if you'd heard, out of the blue, that a man of my age was going to marry a child of eighteen, who'd had a completely sheltered life and knew nothing of the world?'

'I'd say he deserved what was coming to him. But, Trev, circumstances alter cases. From what I've heard of Miss Newton, she is a very able and self-possessed young lady. And don't forget that if you have allowed her to fall in love with you, and yourself to get fond of her, it may be your duty to do something about her. Are you sure that you're not just running away from your responsibilities?'

'I'm sure of nothing at all,' Trevannion said, 'except that I know what people say when a man of my age marries a young girl.'

'If that's all that's worrying you—! Face the facts, Trev. What chance has this girl of getting married, leading the life she leads? Who does she know? Stan, who you say is no good to her. One or two tradesmen. That's all. Wouldn't she be better off married to you, than withering away there with that old spinster, losing her looks, getting all gaunt and eager and haggard?'

Trevannion groaned, and shifted his chair.

'Walter—be honest. Would you wish any girl you were fond of to marry me?'

'Not as you were, Trev. I'd have said you were far too selfish, and would lead her a dog's life. But, the way you are now, it might be the making of you. And her.'

'Then you really think,' Trevannion asked incredulously, 'that it's not a preposterous idea? That I should consider it seriously?'

'I think, of the two of you, that Miss Lily has the more practical and realistic view of the matter.'

'But, Walter—the physical side——'

'Stuff and nonsense,' Walter exclaimed. 'Really, Trev! with your knowledge of women, too. Do you imagine a girl of eighteen would consider marrying you without having thought of that? They're not such delicate plants, believe me. They're a lot tougher than we are.'

Trevannion muttered something about 'prematurely' and 'forced upon her'. Walter laughed.

'My money's on her, Trev. It's she who's taking the lead, by the look of things. Are you sure you've got your motives right?'

'Motives, Walter? What do you mean?'

'Forgive me for suggesting such a thing, but, as one man to another, aren't you perhaps afraid the inadequacy may be on your side?'

'Walter!' Trevannion gasped. Then he stiffened. 'My previous experience has given me no reason to suppose—' he began; and the breath went out of him. 'Damn you,

Walter. You do get under a man's skin.' He raised a hunted face. 'The thought had crossed my mind. But I truly believe, honestly, Walter, it's her I've been thinking about. I care enough for her to be more than anxious not to harm her.'

'I'm sure. Still, it's as well in these cases to examine oneself pretty carefully.'

'As if I haven't. Look at it another way, Walter. In ten years she'll be a young woman in her prime, and I'll be an old man. Suppose my health goes, and she has to nurse me. What life is that for a young girl?'

'In ten years you may be dead. Anything may happen in ten years. If she loves you, she'd a damn sight rather nurse you than let anyone else do it. The one thing that is certain is that if you haven't the guts to shoulder your responsibilities and marry her, she'll eat her heart out because she can't be with you and look after you.'

'She can do that as things are.'

'Not the way a real woman wants to.'

'But—what about the other one? Miss Balgannon? She'll raise Cain.'

'All the more reason for marrying the girl quick, and getting her away. Damn it, Trev, you can't have it every way. Whatever you do, one of 'em won't like it. You've got to make up your mind which, that's all.'

Trevannion's face was shining with sweat.

'I find that extraordinarily difficult, Walter. Extraordinarily. I feel like someone learning to walk all over again. Everything I thought I could count on seems to have gone. I'm starting life afresh, with no assets.'

'You're starting life afresh all right, Trev. And glad I am to see it. Not all of us get the chance.'

'You really and honestly think it is a chance? A change for the good? Not just that I'm breaking up, losing my grip, going senile? That's what I've been afraid of.'

'When the time comes to make a change, one's damn clever at finding reasons not to. I know I am, anyway.'

'Then you think, really, in spite of my age and everything——?'

'Go ahead, Trev old boy. I don't hold with giving advice, but for once I'll break my rule. Go ahead, and good luck to you. It'll be the best day's work you ever did.'

He held out his hand. Trevannion grasped it.

'Thank you, Walter. It's a help to know what you think. And a revelation.' He looked round the room. 'I've cut a pretty poor figure here, cocking myself up above my betters.'

'My dear Trev. You're getting positively maudlin. This conversation has gone on quite long enough.'

'I mean it,' Trevannion said. 'In the last few days, I've begun to see myself: and I'm terrified, when I look back.'

'Don't look back. Look forward. Here—it's catching. I'm getting as bad as you.'

He walked over to the wall, took down his cue, shaped at the red ball, and potted it with a bang.

'Action, Trev. Go thou and do likewise.'

Trevannion paused in the doorway.

'The symbolism, Walter——?'

'Get out. Now you're your own man again. Hullo, Joe. Anything in the paper?'

Joe Blake had appeared on the far side of the door, the evening paper in his hand.

'Divil a word,' he answered. 'The polis is terrible slack.'

There had been no word of Miss Jones: the metropolis had swallowed her up. Nor had the police succeeded in laying hands on the killer of Mr. Antrim. The inquest verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown still hovered like a question-mark over the small innocent harbour. Joe, who since the occurrence had sunk into a melancholy, scanned the papers morning and night in the hope of news. What was his state of mind towards his absconding barmaid none of the regulars could tell. All they saw was that he took a deep interest in the question of her fate, and had gone off his food and drink. Walter prophesied that he would wake up one morning, resoundingly curse all women, and ban them from the remainder of his days: but there was as yet no sign of such emancipation.

Joe sighed, and shook his head.

'Terrible slack, they are,' he said.

Walter's advice produced in Trevannion an agitation even greater than any that had gone before it. Everything in him that wanted to grasp at the new life and the joy of marriage to Lily surged up, and the man who for so long had excluded feeling from his life was turned into a battleground of feelings at their strongest. The onset was too much for him: he became giddy, the blood rushed to his head, he staggered and almost fell. As soon as he got in, the entrance of Lily to his room affected him so that he could hardly speak. His congested face and his hard breathing alarmed her, but she was calm and quiet, and her matter-of-fact questions and the touch of her cool strong fingers on his forehead quickly calmed him. A glow succeeded the chaos of sensation, and his mind eased itself in a blessed sense of peace, at once subdued and exalted, such as he remembered as a child when a storm of tears had washed away a trouble and left all clean and new.

Lily was laying the table for his supper. He reached out a hand and caught her arm.

'You are good to me, Lily. What should I do without you?'

Her colour showed how deeply his words pleased her.

'Well,' she said lightly. 'You won't have to do without me, so that's all right.'

He looked up at her, to read her eyes.

'True?'

'How many more times do you want me to say it?'

'I'd like you to go on saying it for ever. You can't say it too often for me.'

'Waste of time, when you know it perfectly well.'

'But not a waste of time for me to say I love you?'

'That's different,' she said. Her face was turned away, but he saw a dimple near her chin.

'Why? You know *that* perfectly well.'

She wriggled loose.

'Sit still while I get your supper.'

She went to the small cupboard, took out cruet and sugar, put them on the table, and went out. Trevannion suddenly

came to attention. In the middle of it stood a vase, supporting three large chrysanthemums, on long stalks, sticking from it at forlorn and dissolute angles, like mops in a bucket. Trevannion stared. Lily often put flowers in his room, but she had a natural skill in arranging them. She could not have achieved the disarray before him except as a practical joke.

He looked up and pointed as she came in.

'Lily—what on earth——?'

She tossed her head.

'I didn't put them there.'

'I was going to say——'

Then the meaning of it came to him. He gaped at her in consternation.

'Good Lord. The Balgannon. Poor old trout!'

'You're *not* to say unkind things about her,' said Lily illogically: and turned away, so that he should not see her smile. 'She's younger than you, anyway.'

'Well I'm damned. Did you ever see anything so cock-eyed!'

'They're very nice chrysanthemums,' Lily said. 'And she bought them specially.'

'You'd better give her a few lessons. I wonder she didn't stick 'em in beer bottles, one to each.'

'She wouldn't do anything so vulgar.'

'Lily, what shall we do? I can't have this sort of thing. It's—it's indecent.'

'I've told you what we ought to do.' She spoke over her shoulder as she went to the kitchen to get his first course. Trevannion looked after her ruefully. She had taken on a new authority in her dealings with him, and he half liked, half feared it. An impulse came to him.

'You may be interested to hear,' he said, when she came in again, 'that Walter agrees with you.'

She stood still. 'Walter?'

'Walter Nutchery. The billiard player.'

She gave a little frown of impatience, and he realised that she would know about Walter from Stan.

'He agrees with me? What about?'

"That I ought to take you away, and marry you. I told him about us. I hope you won't mind. But I simply had to tell someone, and he is the only person I could trust. Shall I tell you what he said?"

She stood, staring at him with an expression he could not read. After a pause she nodded. Then, remembering, she set his food before him.

"I told him what I was afraid of. That I'd be taking advantage of you. That you didn't perhaps realise what marriage meant. That you were idealising me. That you might find yourself, still young, tied to an old ailing peevish man. I told him everything."

"What did he say?"

"He laughed at me. He said you were twice the man I was. He said that what happened to you was your affair, and that I didn't understand women, and that you'd rather be unhappy with me than without me, and would rather nurse me even than let anyone else do it. He said you were far tougher than I was, and more realistic, and—this was the worst part——"

"Yes?"

"He said that I was persuading myself I was afraid on your account, when all the time it was on my own. Well. What do you say to all that?"

"I think he's very sensible," Lily said. "Now, perhaps, you'll listen to me."

"I believe I shall have to," Trevannion told her, with a grin. "All the same——"

"Go on. Your fish is getting cold."

"All right. But——"

"If I'd known you were going to chatter like this, I'd have brought a cover."

"Chatter," Trevannion said to his plate: and, between mouthfuls, he went on to warn her once more of the practical difficulties that beset the marriage of a minor, and especially one in her position. Now, however, he took her optimistic view. His standing with the local authorities, if a little weakened by the riotous evening and its sequel, was still good, and he told Lily that for him to settle down as a

married man might impress them favourably as evidence of reform.

All the time, as he ate and talked, a feeling of release, of yielding to what was foreordained, fought with sheer unbelief that he, Trevannion, could be sitting at table calmly discussing plans for his marriage to Lily. It was a dream: it could not be true. Yet here it was, and here was he, his pulses pounding at the thought of it, with the feel of the chair solid beneath him, and Lily standing there, one hand on the corner of the table, listening and nodding and looking at him. Yes, it was real, this dream; but, for weeks now, all his life had been passing slowly into a dream. A solid wall in the room that had once seemed his fortress had dissolved, opening on a garden whose light showed up the fortress as a prison, squalid, pitiable, with stained and dirty walls.

'There's one thing that worries me,' he said, 'and that's the Balgannon. What will she do?'

Lily's face clouded.

'I know,' she said. 'That's the only thing that worries me. She'll get someone instead of me, of course. But she's so helpless. Now, she's a child, if anyone is.'

He nodded. 'She'll take it hard. I know her sort. My going, as well as yours.' He looked again at the flowers. 'But you're right. We can't have this sort of thing.'

Lily straightened herself, and stood, facing him squarely.

'It's settled, then? We're going to get married?'

He met her eyes, steadily.

'Yes, Lily. It's a queer way of proposing. But I love you, and I want to marry you.'

Suddenly her face softened, and she went limp. He started up, afraid she was going to faint, but she waved him away.

'No. It's all right. Not here. She might come in. Oh,' she went on shakily, after he had sat down again, looking at her with anxious eyes, 'what a time you've taken. I—I——' she was half laughing, half crying.

'Lily! I don't understand you. I—I thought you were all decided and cool. You took charge of me, like—like——'

'Like a schoolmistress. That's your fault. You made me go like that, dithering about, not able to make up your mind. You don't know what hard work it was.'

He got up, came round, and hugged her. She went limp, clinging to his shoulders, putting up her face to his.

'Oh, Trev, Trev, Trev,' she sobbed: and Trevannion wept with her. It was the first time she had called him by any name since she stopped saying Mr. Trevannion.

'A couple of minutes later Trevannion was once more sitting at the table. He blew his nose with a trumpeting sound, and polished off the chilled remains of his fish. Lily went to the kitchen, made a face at herself in the glass, straightened her hair, and fetched Trevannion's sweet from the oven.

When she went in with it she was once more composed and business-like.

'Which of us is to tell Miss Balgannon?' she asked. 'Will you, or will I?'

Trevannion sighed.

'I will. It'll come better from me.'

'How will you do it?'

'I'll just announce it to her as if it was very good news which she'd be delighted to hear.'

Lily made a face.

'I must go,' she said. 'It's time for her supper now.'

'Right. I'll see her after she's had it.'

'Tell me what she says.'

'Of course.'

He finished his meal, and sat in his easy chair, telling himself that it was consideration for Miss Balgannon's stomach that bade him postpone the interview, wishing he could get it over at once, shrinking from it, and apprehensive lest both the suspense and the encounter interfere with his digestion. He looked at his watch, decided he would give the old girl forty minutes for her meal, then picked up a book and tried to read. His earlier fears had not departed, but he welcomed now any step which accelerated the mechanism that was making irrevocable his union with Lily. Everyone he told took him that much nearer, and made it

harder to retreat. Not that he wished to retreat: but each step forward was a blow to the fears, and made their rout more certain.

Lily, taking in Miss Balgannon's meal, a far less substantial affair than Trevannion's, found her mistress in a state of suppressed excitement. She noticed it, despite her own concerns, but could not account for it. Miss Balgannon settled the matter by calling her back as she reached the door.

'Er—Lily.'

'Yes, Miss Balgannon?'

'I—that is—er—did Mr. Trevannion notice the flowers?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Lily truthfully replied. 'He did.'

Miss Balgannon looked down at her plate, but not before Lily had seen a gleam set her face alight, a look of joy and triumph. It hit the girl like a blow, filling her with a sick pity. Aghast at the cruelties of life, she went soberly back to the kitchen. An impulse to go in to Trevannion turned suddenly to an aversion. She longed to run to some deep, secret place and hide her head until the whole business was over, and she could emerge as Trevannion's wife.

Walking downcast into her kitchen, she did not see she had a visitor until she was half-way across.

'Stan! oh, you gave me a fright! A mercy I hadn't the tray. I'd have dropped it with everything on it.'

'Sorry, Lily.'

His voice had a bubbling undertone which meant he was pleased about something. It made her indignant.

'What are you doing here, anyway? It's not your day.'

Normally such sharpness in her voice would have made Stan start back and blink guiltily. This time he took hardly any notice.

'I 'ad to come. I couldn't 'elp it. I got good noos.'

She surveyed him. His face, which had straightened a little in pretended deference to her wrath, burst into a grin like an orang-outang's.

'Mr. Calstock. 'E's took me on, reg'lar. As junior partner. I'm to 'ave commission, an' a share in the business, later on, like.'

Even in her present state, Lily saw how momentous this was. She made herself smile.

'Stan! I am glad. That's even better than you hoped, isn't it?'

'Better! Not 'alf. I couldn't never 'ave expected nothin' like that. Mr. Calstock, 'e sends for me into 'is office. "Come in," 'e says. "Shut the door. Sit down." Coo, I didn't 'alf get the wind up. "Stan boy," 'e says. "I'll speak plain. I've took a fancy to you, Stan boy," 'e says. "I bin watchin' you, ever since you come to work 'ere," 'e says, "an' you done well. Very well, you done. Now," 'e says, "I got no one o' me own to succeed after me, and carry on the business; so what say if I takes you into partnership, like, to take it over when I retires, an' keep it for your own when I'm gone?" That's what 'e said to me.'

'Stan. How lovely. What did you say?'

'I couldn't 'ardly say nothin'. The breath was knocked out o' me, like. Fair winded, I was. "Thank you very much, Mr. Calstock," I says, as soon as I could. "Suits me." "Very good," 'e says. "I'll 'ave it all drew up accordin'." And 'e shakes 'ands wi' me; and 'ere I am. I 'ad to come straight to tell you.'

'Of course you did, Stan. I'm so glad.'

'Yes. I thought you would be.' He stood, slowly growing redder. 'Yes,' he repeated. And then, with an effort, 'Makes a difference, don't it?'

'A big difference.'

She saw where he was heading, and waited warily for a chance to divert him and get rid of him.

'Yes. You see—now—I got prospects.'

'Yes, Stan.'

Her smile was impersonal. She went over to the dresser, and began to move things about. Then she crossed to the sink, and turned the taps on.

Stan followed her. 'You said, one time——' he began, but the taps made such a noise, and Lily splashed about with such resolute preparation for washing up, that he had to stand at her shoulder and start again.

'Lily.'

'Yes.'

Lily. You said once——'

There was a dogged note in his voice, a woodenness that told her he was going to get it out, whatever happened.

'You said once the trouble was, I got no prospecks.'

'Well,' she replied brightly, sprinkling soda into a saucepan, 'you hadn't, had you?'

'No. But I got some now.'

'That's splendid for you. You won't have to worry. I kept telling you not to worry, didn't I?'

'Yes. And now that I got prospecks, and give up the Ring——'

'You're a respectable member of society. My! You'll be getting so rich and important, I'll be scared of you soon.'

'No you won't.' He moved closer. 'You don't never have to be scared of me, Lily. You know that.'

'Very well, then. If you're not too grand and important, you can dry for me. There's a cloth. Over there, by the stove. Not that one. How often have I to tell you! that one comes off on the glasses.'

Stan lumbered back, picked up a tumbler, and absently began to rub at it.

'Lily——'

'Look what you're doing. You'll break that glass, if you're not careful.'

So, resolutely, she headed him off from the thing he longed to say, her heart aching all the time with pity. Why couldn't she be happy without hurting other people, harmless, innocent people whom she had no wish to hurt?

When Stan left at last, most of his delight gone, looking at her dumbly yet without reproach, his patient love of her accepting even this rebuff, she could not keep the tears from her eyes. Worst of all, she felt a mounting anger, against Stan, against Trevannion even, against everyone who made life so difficult and so complicated, so that feelings arose in her which she could neither understand or control, making her hate herself and wish she had never come to 'The Beeches', never been born.

Trevannion looked at the clock, put a marker in his book, got up, went across the landing and knocked at Miss Balgannon's door. A surprised voice bade him come in.

She had finished her meal, and was sitting in an uncomfortable, semi-upright chair, constructed with no regard for the human frame. He advanced on her, picked up a chair from beside the table, and sat down opposite her.

'My dear Miss Balgannon, I have come to tell you a piece of wonderful news.'

He beamed at her, leaned forward, and took both her hands.

'I knew, the moment I came into this house, that I had entered on a new period of prosperity and happiness. Everything has gone well with me here. I have been perfectly looked after, cherished, fussed over, made to feel at home. And now, to crown it all, the greatest happiness of my life has befallen me. And it is largely your doing. I have come to love our dear Lily, and I find, to my joy, that she loves me in return. So we have arranged to be married.'

He pressed her hands, and looked at her, earnest, smiling.

'Dear Miss Balgannon, I feel you are the real author of our happiness. I have come to tell you, before anyone, what has happened. I wished you to be the first to hear of it, and I know you will wish me joy, and give me your blessing.'

He had hardly dared observe Miss Balgannon during this speech. Indeed he had deliberately blurred his sight, so that no expression on her features might check or chill its pre-arranged warm flow. Now, at last, he looked into her face. It was, as nearly as could be, expressionless. She was looking down, and her eyelids blinked rapidly; that was all.

'Well, dear Miss Balgannon. Do you congratulate me?'

It was his richest, warmest tone. She stirred a little, and looked up, past his head.

'I—oh yes—of course. I am sure I hope—'

'I feel she is your gift to me. In a sense, your creation. You took her from the home. Your loving care made her, built her up.'

'No,' she said, with an unexpected firmness. 'Lily has

always been a strong character. I did nothing. It's she who has looked after me.'

'You cared for her, fed her, were kind to her, gave her affection.'

'Yes, and——'

She broke off, and shut her mouth tightly.

'Ah, Miss Balgannon!' He shook his head. 'It is like you to disclaim credit, but yours was the care, the love. In your home she grew to be the girl that I—that we both love. That is why I shall always be grateful to you, to the end of my days.'

Her eyelids flickered again in a rapid tremor.

'I hope you will be very happy,' she said. He could get no more out of her, so, after a few more pretty speeches, and a renewed pressure of her thin pale hands, he went back to his room.

'Thank God that's done,' he exclaimed to his mahogany secretary. He rang his bell, and after a couple of minutes Lily put her head around the door.

'I told her,' he said in a low tone. 'She took it damned well. Not a squeak out of her. Quiet as you'd wish. I was afraid she'd make a scene.'

Lily, who had not met his eye, nodded, and went out again.

'Lily——'

She had gone. He felt a momentary pang of dismay, then shrugged his shoulders. The poor girl had had enough on her plate for one day.

She was to get more. It was Miss Balgannon's habit to drink a cup of cocoa just before going to sleep. Lily would bring it to her bedroom on a tray.

To-night, when Lily at last forced herself to carry in the tray, the atmosphere in the room was like stretched elastic. At any moment it might snap and cut her face. Trembling, Lily approached the bed.

Miss Balgannon was sitting up, motionless, intent, her shoulders a little bowed beneath the thin white Shetland shawl that covered her nightdress.

'Here you are, Miss Balgannon.'

As Lily set the tray on her knees, the elastic snapped. With a little crowing sound, Miss Bagganock knocked the cocoa sideways and sent it in a sprawled brown stain over the coverlet. She crowed again, and struck at Lily, ineffectual, her fingers bunched together and pointed to make a bird-like beak.

'You wicked, wicked, treacherous, ungrateful girl!' she squeaked. 'After all I've done for you. Oh! Oh——'

Her voice rose in the same high, indrawn crowing note. Then with hideous unexpectedness it broke and fell to a growl, as she turned away and collapsed sideways on the pillow in harsh, animal weeping.

Lily stood for a moment horror-struck; then she hurried from the room, ran to her own, and locked the door.

She was roused goodness knows how much later by sounds which renewed the sweat of horror, and believed for a moment that her mistress had fallen into another fit of lamentation. But when the beating of her heart and the first confusion of her sense allowed her to hear them clearly, the sounds were different: snoring, choking sounds, half cough, half groan, a laboured stertorous struggle as if someone muffled under a heavy weight were struggling to get free. And—the realisation made her jump from her bed, her heart beating more wildly than ever—they came from Trevannion's bedroom.

Before she could think she had pulled a dressing-gown round her and was flying down the passage. An instant's pause at his door confirmed her fears, and she burst in.

'Trev! whatever is it?'

She switched on the light. Trevannion lay rigid, his face congested, his open mouth twisted to one side, and the room was loud with his disaster.

XVII

TREVANNION'S stroke left him paralysed all down the right side and, at first, unable to speak clearly. He made sounds not unlike those he had devised to torment his musical wife, and looked at Lily with anguished eyes until she, divining what was in his mind, made clear to him that she knew the ugly sounds were not deliberate.

Lily, after the first two days, took over all the care of him. Both the doctor and the district nurse were impressed by her coolness and capability and, as soon as they learned that she and Trevannion were to be married, withdrew the last of their opposition. Trevannion was bitterly ashamed of his weakness and loss of control, which meant that she had to do everything for him: but Lily made it all seem so natural, she was so perfectly in her element, that in a day or so he had given himself up to her like a child. Indeed, apart from the shock of his illness and her anxiety for him, Lily was never so happy as during those days when he depended on her for everything.

As if to attest the excellence of her nursing, he began quickly to recover. In ten days, his speech had come back. It was still thick and slurred, but there was no longer any difficulty in making out what he meant. Better, there were signs that he would regain much of his lost power of movement. He progressed so fast that the doctor congratulated Lily, but warned her against letting him try to do too much. Given a quiet, well-regulated life, he told her, Trevannion might last many years: but with such a plethoric type there was always a danger of recurrence. Above all, he should be guarded from worry or violent emotion.

Miss Balgannon had accepted the situation without comment—which was as well, since in the first confusion no one had a thought for her. She seemed to think it natural that Lily should nurse the invalid, and not to resent being pushed into the background. Lily saw to it that she was not neglected: her meals were as well cooked and punctual as

ever: but Trevannion came first, the household centred on him, and Miss Balgannon might have been an insignificant guest under her own roof. All this she took without appearing to notice it. Neither she nor Lily made any allusion to the scene in her bedroom: it was officially forgotten. She did not come near Trevannion till the eleventh day after his seizure, merely inquiring each morning how he was, and she would not have gone to see him then had not Lily pushed her in the door.

Trevannion smiled from his still twisted face.

'Well, Miss Balgannon. I'm indeed sorry to behave like this, and cause you all so much trouble.'

'Not at all,' she said. 'I hope you are feeling better.'

'I feel fine—thanks to the nursing I've had. I'll soon be up and about again.'

'You mustn't be in too much of a hurry.' She was like a child repeating a lesson.

'I have to do what my doctor tells me. And my nurse!'

'Yes.'

He might as well have talked to an automaton. She stood, not looking at him, silent, but apparently unembarrassed. It was impossible to guess what she was thinking. Very likely she did not know.

Other visitors came, as soon as Trevannion was well enough: Walter, wry and humorous, whom he was really pleased to see: Stan, awkward but full of good will: and the Mountaineer, from whose hand Lily firmly removed the Alpenstock before she even let him into the hall. Each was only allowed a very few minutes, as Trevannion tired very quickly, and Walter alone was encouraged to come regularly.

For long periods Lily sat in the room, sewing, saying little or nothing. Her presence comforted Trevannion, and he was able to rest and often to sleep if she was there. He could not bear her to be away. In the course of getting a meal ready she would put her head in several times to say a word to him and see if he wanted anything.

Then, after a fortnight's good progress, he seemed to go back. His temperature rose, he had pain, his speech became difficult again. The doctor could not account for these

symptoms, and charged Lily to find out if he was worrying over something. Lily, who had the same idea herself, asked Trevannion if there were any truth in it.

The reply disconcerted her. His face twitched painfully, and he began to weep.

'What is it? Don't hurry. Take your time. You'll feel better when you tell me.'

He clung to her hand, and made several efforts to speak.

'Don't bother,' she said, smiling at him. 'I'll ask you, and you shall say yes or no.'

She leaned over him, and dried the tears from his face.

'Is it about me?' He shook his head. 'Is it a new thing?' He shook it again. 'Do I know about it?' A convulsive clutch, and a violent and agitated headshake told her she was getting warm. 'Do you want to tell me?' A series of vehement, laboured nods.

She looked at him thoughtfully, but still with a smile.

'Not a new thing, and you want to tell me.' Her eyes gleamed. 'Didn't you want to? Something you didn't want to, but do now?'

Tears of relief ran from his eyes, and he nodded again. She pressed his hand.

'I know. It's the thing that hurt you, and made you turn against people. Isn't that it?'

A great sigh came from him, his lips moved, and the word 'yes' emerged.

'There you are, then.' She wiped the sweat from his forehead. 'Working yourself up all about nothing. Of course you shall tell me, whenever you feel like it.'

'You won't'—he paused long and painfully, with shut eyes—'be angry?'

'Of course I won't. Now you go to sleep, and don't worry about it any more.'

So great was the relief this gave Trevannion that he fell into a deep sleep, and was very much better when he awoke. Next day, his speech had come back, and he seemed better than ever.

The doctor looked grave when he heard that what

Trevannion wanted to say went back a long way and was painful to him.

'It may give him a setback to dig it all up,' he told Lily. He should be the better for it, in the long run, but the chances are it will upset him at the time. It's a risk; but you'd better take it. Try to get him to put it off for a few days, if you can.'

Lily did her best, and only gave way when she found that Trevannion was afraid he might have another stroke and lose all power of speech, or even die, with his secret untold. Once more she asked the doctor's advice, which was to tell Trevannion he might say all he wished on the next day, and in the interim to give him a medicine which should help him over the ordeal.

On the appointed day Trevannion's speech was clear and accurate, though much slower than when he had his health. The story he told took a long time, with frequent pauses for breath, and struggles to fight down the violent emotions which it caused him. At first he laboured with the barest narrative, but as the story progressed, to her astonishment, he spoke faster, and towards the end he was almost fluent, probably in relief from the burden of what had so long gripped and oppressed him.

He spoke with a formality which surprised her until she realised that it was due to slowness of speech. Soon she ceased to notice it.

2

'I have wanted to tell you this,' Trevannion said, 'for what seems a long time. The reason it has been so difficult is because I tried to forget it, and did forget it, and it was only when I began to love you that it woke up again, and I had to remember it for myself first, before I could tell it to you.'

'When I was a young man I had several affairs with girls, but it was always easy for me to get what I wanted. They always cared more for me than I did for them. By the time I was twenty-six I decided that that was all there was, and that falling in love was a thing that didn't exist. I couldn't deny that some people seemed to fall in love, but, as I didn't,

and it would never have done to admit that I was deficient in any way, I decided it was a weakness and a folly and that I was above it.

'Then one day I met a girl who was different from all the other girls. I saw it at once, and I began to fall in love with her. I don't know if you could call it love at first sight, because I had never been in love, and so I didn't realise that the sensations I felt and the things that happened to me meant that I had fallen in love. I lost weight, I was restless, I couldn't eat, and yet it took me weeks to realise what was the matter with me.'

Lily wanted to know what he felt towards the girl. Didn't he connect her with all this?

'I followed her about, I tried to see her, I thought of her all the time—and yet I didn't connect my loss of appetite and restlessness with her. I thought they were just something that was happening at the same time: a coincidence. Silly, wasn't it?

'I'd got to know her by now. She was polite to me, she smiled, in an aloof, self-possessed sort of way. She was very graceful. She was the most graceful person I have ever seen. It was a wonder to see her move. She walked beautifully. All her gestures were easy, and seemed to flow from her mind and from her spirit. Her figure was slender and tall, except that her hands and feet were a little too large: but they were perfectly shaped. Her face—yes, one came last to her face. Not that she was plain, or that it was insignificant: but while with so many girls it's their face you look at first, to say whether they are good-looking or not, her face was only a part of her beauty. It could be beautiful, at times, and with certain expressions.'

Lily pressed him for more details. He sighed, and moved his head from side to side on the pillow.

'Her skin was pale, her face oval, with a lovely bone structure under it, but none of her features was remarkable. I don't remember what colour her eyes were: I think, grey-green. She had rather a wide mouth. I've heard people say her face was too much like a mask, but that wasn't true. It was very calm and serene, and hardly showed at all what

was going on underneath. If I had to choose a single word to describe her, it would be "graceful". And, to describe her properly, graceful would have to mean gracious too.

'I can see now half a dozen reasons why I fell in love with her. The quiet unflurried way she went about things promised security and peace. Her beauty made me ache to have it with me always. She had a perfect understanding; one never needed to explain things to her. She was kind and gentle, and at the same time she had a mind that, when it came to facts and to abstract things and arguments, could be as clear as a man's. I nearly said clear and hard—but hard was a word you could never use about her. Oh, there were lots of reasons for falling in love, but I needed none of them. I loved her in the way a plant loves the sunlight, because I couldn't help it. She fulfilled my nature. She was what I needed to make me a man, the man I was meant to be. With her I could have done anything. Or so I believed. And, in spite of all that's happened, in spite of all the degradation I've sunk to, I believe it still.'

There was a silence of some minutes, while Trevannion lay with closed eyes, regaining strength to go on.

'She liked me from the first, but it took her a long time to admit that she loved me. And'—he heaved himself up on his elbow, panting—'she did love me. That I know. It wasn't only affection. She tried to pretend it was, but that was later, when . . . oh, what's the use! She did love me. We could have made a success of it, if only—'

He lay back. Lily sponged his forehead, and calmed him with soothing words.

'I must explain to you,' Trevannion went on presently, 'how it was we were able to meet. We were lucky. Yes: in those days, it could be exceedingly difficult for a man and a girl to meet, let alone be in a room together with no one else there. She had a cousin, a girl older than herself—fourteen or fifteen years older—who was a painter. This girl had a rambling sort of house with a studio, or perhaps it would be truer to say a studio with a few rooms thrown in, where for a long time she'd lived alone. It worried her relatives, and so, when Vere decided to study art—she lived

in the provinces—it seemed a good thing to the family that she should come and live with Elizabeth.

‘Elizabeth wasn’t one to worry about any responsibility that might lie on her. Very much the reverse, in fact. She gave Vere a big barn of a room all to herself, and a latch-key, and left her to her own devices. She saw to it that there was food, and all that kind of thing, she was ready to look after Vere in material ways, though actually it soon was Vere who did the shopping and cooked the meals and looked after Elizabeth. But she was of an independent turn of mind, Elizabeth was, and very early on she made it clear that Vere’s comings and goings were no concern of hers, and that who she went about with was her own affair.’

‘This suited me, as you may imagine. It meant I could be with Vere as much as I liked, or as much as she liked, which was very nearly the same thing. I went to her room, more and more often. In the end, I almost lived there.’

He paused, breathing heavily. Every word came with increasing effort.

‘I slept there. This is the hardest part to tell you. Oh no: not because I slept there. But—she loved me in every way but the one. And she would have come to love me that way too. I believed that. I still believe it. I—oh, I don’t know. Don’t ask me to throw away the last rag of self-respect—

‘She loved me in every way but that,’ he repeated. ‘Her response to me was complete, but for that one spark. Left to herself—he was breathing fast and painfully—‘she did not want to sleep with me. Did not *want* to. But, after a long time, in affection and loving kindness, seeing how terribly I needed it, she gave me what I needed. I never repelled her: she told me that, afterwards. It was just that she did not want me in all the ways I wanted her.’

He turned tortured eyes on Lily. ‘Do you understand?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. Perfectly.’

‘Well: it went on for quite a while, and we were happy. I grew and expanded, all my needs were met, I lived as I have never lived before or since, I had fullness of life: and she was happy, both in herself and in seeing me so happy.

I do want you to be clear about this. I wasn't forcing on her anything she wanted to repel. Only that she would have been content without it.

'Lily, it was perfect. We never had a cross word. We cooked all sorts of little meals together, we played silly games, we went to concerts and theatres, and when they were over we could always come back and be together. She loved that part of it, the cosy, warm, affectionate part. It was only——'

'I understand,' Lily said, and put her hand on his. He clasped it. His hand was hot and wet.

'It was perfect. I talked of marriage, often, and she would smile and listen, but she never said anything definite: and I was in no hurry. Things were so good as they were. Besides, it wasn't going to be practicable, until I could make more money. I'd precious little: none to play about with. Any I had went on her. She used to scold me, in her gentle way, and I would come back by saying what was the good of saving until she'd promised to marry me.

'Then——' he broke off, and began to sweat so hard that Lily made him wait till she had once more sponged his forehead.

'I knew,' he said, 'for some time, that something was wrong. You can't love anyone so closely without knowing. She changed. She began not so much to hold me off as to respond less and less. She said one night "I wish I enjoyed it more," in a tone I'd never heard from her, that I didn't know was in her voice. Not hard, but calculating, with hidden thoughts behind it. Then came a day when she shrank from me—involuntarily, only for an instant, but there was no mistaking it. She had gone tense. She yielded with her will.

'The next time we were together she told me. There was only the one way of loving we didn't share, and it had fallen to another man. The thing I had longed for her to learn she had learnt, but not with me. She called it the spark, I remember. She said she had always known she could feel it, and that it was in her to respond passionately, but that I had made her afraid that she was defective, that

There was something missing in her make-up, something wrong with her. I had made her feel that. I, who would have given my right arm for her to want me as I wanted her.

'I pleaded with her. I said impossible things. I said that now she had learned to respond, why couldn't she respond to me? She said then, flat in my face, "I never will. Never. Not in ten-lifetimes."

'I nearly went mad. I grabbed her by the shoulders, I shook her, shouted at her, I took her by the throat. She said "I feel weak, I have no will power," and was all limp and relaxed. What could I do? I got up, leaving her lying there across the bed, and raged about the room. I threw over a table. I banged my head against the wall, I howled like a beaten dog. I knelt beside her and wept and held her hand against my cheek. I begged her to forgive me. I told her I loved her more than anything or anyone in the world. I pleaded for my very life.'

'What did she say?' Lily asked in a whisper.

'She sat up, and stroked my hair. Her voice was weak and she kept on coughing: in my madness, I had half choked her. She was sweet and gentle, she forgave me utterly, she was goodness itself. But on the one point she was inflexible. I saw that, if it meant her death, she would never give way.

'I can't tell you the hell of the next days and weeks. I tried haunting the place, so that he—whoever he was—couldn't get there. She soon put paid to that. She'd always kept a part of her life secret from me. There were evenings when she went off on her own, and gave no account of them, and I'd always respected it, though even that was hard for me. I loved her so much I wanted to know all about every minute. She'd met that, when I said it to her, as gently and reasonably as she met everything: said she must have times and places to herself, that she needed them, and, as I was a bit given that way too, I couldn't help seeing the fairness of it.

'I tried following her one night, in my despair. It was a bad thing to do, I knew, and God, I suffered for it. First of all, there was the happy look of her as she came out, happy

and eager, and a spring in her step. Then I saw her meet the man, and run towards him, and put up her face to be kissed. Another time, I lurked near the studio, and saw her let him in.'

Trevannion was now in such a state of agitation that Lily became frightened. She wanted to stop him, but knew he would have no peace till he had told her everything.

'I went through hell. She had told me that what she had given me of her charity was compulsive with him, that she longed to, that she must. Can you imagine what it is to think of another man being made free of all you have loved and worshipped, other hands loving her, and touching all that was yours; and she, not just yielding, but pressing up to meet him?'

His voice had risen to a groan of agony, and he thrashed about on the bed. Lily stood over him, one hand still clasping his, the other on his forehead.

'It is the most hideous torture, the most frightful, driving, tearing pain. I felt as if my veins were full of molten steel, as if my muscles would tear and crack, as if my loins were tigers. My forehead swelled, my throat ached till I couldn't even whisper. I walked the streets for hours. I ran one night until I fell and lay in the rain with no strength to get up, and a policeman came and thought I was drunk. I dared not go near Vere, for fear I should really kill her. I longed to kill the man, but he looked tough, athletic, one of those lean, swarthy swine with dago faces that women find fascinating. He danced well, too. Oh yes, I saw them once. I wasn't spared anything. I must admit, he was a handsome, sinewy devil, he moved well, like an animal. Oh, I could see why she fell for him, I could understand his hold over her. And I had done it all; I had brought it on myself. Oh yes, I had. Don't you see? I'd stimulated that side of her, the physical love, and made her ready for someone else.

'I don't know how I didn't go mad. I'd never guessed it was possible for a human being to suffer the torments I suffered then, and stay alive, much less sane. Every night, when I went to bed, I was haunted by the beauty of her body, every detail, every touch, and the thought of that

slave, confident, muscular devil, with his brown, whipcord body, commanding her. There's no torment of mind beyond that, or if there is, thank God I never felt it.

'And, when those tortures of jealousy continue, there's a terrible thing that can happen. From imagining what's going on, from having it seize and occupy and eat your mind, you can begin to see it, and, what's worse, to feel it. Your soul can be sucked into another's body: and, if you can imagine what it's like to receive what is not given to you, not meant for you——'

He broke off, and was unable to speak for many minutes. His heart was pounding in his chest, his breathing irregular, fast and shallow, with an occasional deep breath, that left him in a long, gasping sigh. Frightened, Lily tried to calm and restore him. She whispered to him that it was over and done with, that everything was all right now, and there was nothing he need worry about any longer. At the same time, she knew, by an obstinate unwavering point of inner light, that he would have no peace till he had poured away the last dregs of his pain.

When he spoke again, his speech was a breath only.

'I don't know how long that went on. For a while I clung to her, clung to what was left of our love for each other. No, that isn't fair. She loved me still, in her calm, disembodied—hell, I must get it right! In the calm, disembodied way which was all she had for me. There was nothing disembodied about——'

A spasm of pain twisted his face. He caught his breath, and resumed.

'But, for me, it was unbearable. The ignominy of decline. Having been all-important, to sink to second-rate. To see in her eyes, and the day-dreams she would fall into when we were talking, that someone else possessed her. I couldn't bear it. And yet I loved her still, desperately. I made scenes. I raged and raved and wept. She was gentle, kind, and didn't give way an inch.

'After one scene I made my resolve. She'd been, in her quiet way, anxious to get me out of the place that afternoon. Obviously she was expecting him. I hid, and saw him

come, and presently I watched them walk away together, she on his arm, laughing, happy.

'Then I saw that my only defence was to hate. To hate—and never to feel again. For the rest of my life, I would make women my victims. All the others should pay for what a woman had done to me.'

'She hadn't done anything to you,' Lily said gently. 'You did it to yourself.'

'I know. I know. I'm telling you what I resolved then. But she was too strong for me, even so. I couldn't forget her. Every woman I loved was just a search for her. On the body of every woman I slept with I searched always for the memories of her body. I was a slave. Even hate didn't deliver me. And what was the good of savaging her in my imagination, if even my imagination had to moan over her afterwards and beg her forgiveness?'

'Poor Trev. Poor darling.'

He tried to smile at her, shakily, his eyes wet.

'Well: that's how I've lived. That's the hurt you guessed at. That's the state I'd got into—until you came along and got me out of it. And a pretty state you've got me into, instead of it!'

'Darling. Do you really think I've made you ill—that it's all my fault?'

'Of course I don't. Didn't I tell you, no one hurts me but myself? All the same I'm sure—somehow—there's a connection . . . you see . . . loving you . . . feeling love once again . . . took me back to all I felt then. I'd somehow managed to keep it under, but it was there all the time . . . and so . . .'

She nodded. 'It broke out, sort of.'

'That's it.' He smiled at the sudden childishness of her words. 'It was like a poison, coming to the top. But it's gone now.'

'Yes. It's all gone.' She bent over him, arranging his pillows. 'Now you must lie back, and have a sleep. You're tired.'

'Yes,' he said, and, so suggestible was he, he turned a shade paler. 'I'll have a rest.'

Far from being worse, Trevannion appeared markedly the better for uncovering the experience which he felt to have been the turning point in his life. The pain of reviving it brought him release, and he lay for the next two days in an almost childlike state of contentment, saying very little, resting tranquilly after the effort that had cost him so much.

By the third morning he began to pick up and show signs of wanting to get back into the world. He asked to see Walter, and spoke to him cheerfully and with decision about getting up and resuming his visits to 'The Peace'. He inquired after Joe, and whether there was news of Miss Jones. Altogether, Walter was with him for close on forty minutes, and Lily, jealous of her charge, could find no traces of fatigue. Instead, he demanded the evening paper.

Thus when, a couple of afternoons later, there came an imperious rapping on the front door, and she opened it to reveal the Mountaineer, Lily did not turn him away. Saying 'I'll go and see if he's awake', as a precaution, she went and asked Trevannion if he could bear to see the visitor.

Trevannion put down his book and beamed. 'Good old Mount. Show him in. Hi!' he called, as she was going. 'Put your head in after ten minutes or so, in case I'm finding him too much.'

'You're sure you wouldn't rather I sent him away?'

'No, no. I'd like to see him. It's only in case he starts shouting at me. I couldn't quite manage that yet.'

But the Mountaineer did not shout. Smiling on Lily—his smile was as startling as a splash of sunlight on a rock, with the same sudden uncalled-for grace—he came in, and stood, towering over the bed, and gazing down upon its occupant.

Trevannion greeted him. He acknowledged the greeting, and stood silent, looking at Trevannion speculatively, from half-shut eyes.

'Well, Trevannion, my dear fellow,' he said at last, 'and have you repented of your sins?'

Trevannion stared at him, amazed. His eyes opened so wide that the whites showed all round.

'Yes, Mount. That's precisely what I *have* been doing. But how did you know?'

'I knew that you would realise, sooner or later, that you were made in the image of God. And therefore regret your way of life.'

'What do you know about my way of life?'

'I could see it was not as it should be. That your immortal part was suffering, and in bondage.'

'How do you know about these things, Mount? I don't mean it offensively, but—well, how *do* you know?'

'My dear Trevannion. You have always patronised me, and supposed me to be mad. I am not mad. My life and I suit each other very well. I live the way I wish.'

'I used to say that. I remember saying it to poor Teddie. To Antrim.'

'The Attorney. Well—*de mortuis*. But there was a difference. I live from within outwards. You stifled your inner life. You were in danger, my friend. Grave danger. But, now that you have repented, all is well.'

Trevannion made a face.

'I've never thought much of death-bed repentances. This might have been a death-bed.' As the Mountaineer did not contradict him, he went on, 'It doesn't seem fair, to live all one's life in one way, and then turn round at the end and beg off the consequences.'

'You are looking at the matter in terms of earthly time, my dear fellow. A grave fallacy. God is not limited by time. His work is instantaneous. The revelation. The miracle.'

'I've always been bothered,' Trevannion said—'at least, I used to be, when I took stock of such things—by the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. It seemed so damned unfair. But it's life; life. It happens in love, for instance. You love a girl faithfully for years, and some glib sod comes along at the heel of the hunt and snitches her from you.'

The Mountaineer frowned austere at Trevannion's choice of phrase.

'Be thankful that the love of God is instantaneous, and

can leap out and touch you. We should be in a bad case, were it otherwise.'

Trevannion looked at him, leaning on an elbow.

'I never knew you were interested in these things, Mount? I never heard you talk theology, except when you were drunk.'

'*In vino veritas.*' The Mountaineer smiled bleakly. 'A man does not willingly lay bare his soul to have it made a laughing stock.'

'I'll never laugh at you again, Mount.'

'I expect you will.'

'Well—never in the same way.'

'I never minded your laughter, my dear fellow.'

'That was good of you. You might have.'

'No,' said the Mountaineer innocently. 'I knew that the truth would prevail. There was much good in you. There is good in us all.'

'Even in poor Teddie,' Trevannion said. 'He was killed doing his one decent action.'

The Mountaineer had stiffened at the mention of his adversary, but Trevannion persisted, and told him the real reason for that last visit to 'The Peace'. Then, to his consternation, he felt a rush of cold panic, and could hardly speak. He had wantonly roused a dangerous subject; he had reminded the Mountaineer of a humiliation, a disgrace, the police, of everything. Why, why, why? When all was peaceful, when his friend had come to see him, and spoken words of comfort and understanding, why had he so repaid him?

With tears in his eyes, he stretched out a shaking hand. 'Forgive me, Mount. I didn't mean to drag up a painful subject. It was only your saying there was good in us all. I felt treacherously towards Teddie: I would have betrayed him the moment it suited me. I'm ashamed of that. I wanted to give him any credit I could: not to hurt you.'

The Mountaineer, who stood in tight-lipped offence, inclined his head.

'Having yourself repented, you do right to call me to repentance.'

'I didn't mean—truly——'
'Set your mind at rest.' The warm smile flashed through, ennobling his lean actor's face. 'It is a new thing, and a good thing, to see you concerned lest you have hurt another's feelings. I rejoice in your amendment, my dear fellow.'

He shot out a long, gaunt arm, and shook Trevannion's hand. Trevannion could hardly speak. Lily, looking in a minute later, was angry, and shooed the Mountaineer out. Trevannion, as soon as she came back, protested that the visit had done him good.

Lily sniffed. She liked the Mountaineer, and would not admit it.

'He's queer. I can't make him out. Did you say he was on the stage?'

'On the halls. Years ago.'

'Why did he stop?'

'They gave him the bird one night. Boomed him off. Somewhere up north. He never got over it.'

'Poor Mr. Watteau.'

'He's made me feel pretty small, anyway, this poor Mr. Watteau.'

'How dare he!' said Lily indignantly: and all Trevannion's explanations could not convince her that the Mountaineer was not to blame for scolding and upsetting him. 'Just wait till I see him!' she exclaimed. 'I'll give him a piece of my mind.'

Trevannion tried once more to disabuse her of this notion, but at last gave it up, lying back exhausted, eyeing her with an exasperated affection, that quickly melted into joy at being so jealously protected and loved. He was her property, and she should do just what she liked with him.

4

'I still don't think it's right,' Trevannion said, 'for you to tie yourself up to an old crock like me. But I can't tell you what a comfort and joy it is to know that you mean to.'

Lily looked at him. A clear sunlight was pouring into the room. It fell on the bedclothes, and lit Trevannion's face from below, smoothing out the heavier lines, and giving him

an almost youthful look. One of the many things about him which caught at her heart was his capacity for suddenly looking young and vulnerable: a small boy peeping out from the mask, and transforming it.

For a couple of days now he had made steady progress, so much that they had once more begun to discuss ways and means, and to talk of leaving 'The Beeches' and finding a new home. But Trevannion kept harping on the difference in their ages. Each time Lily hoped she had silenced him and set his mind at rest: yet, every quarter of an hour or so, he came back to the same point.

'Now listen to me!' She leaned forward, and made him look at her. 'I've had about enough of this talk. Will you get it into your head, once and for all, that I'm doing the thing I want to do most in the world. If I had ten lives to live, I'd choose to do the same thing each time. If I couldn't marry you and look after you, I'd be miserable. I'd rather be dead, than not marry you. So now.'

Trevannion smiled ruefully. 'Well,' he said, 'you can't say fairer than that, bless you.' His eyes watered, and he stretched out a hand to her. 'All the same, it's not natural, for a young, healthy girl.'

'I daresay not,' Lily retorted. 'But a lot of things about me aren't natural. My parents left me, and that's not natural. I'd no mother, like other children. I'd no home of my own, till I came here.' She turned away from him, and her shoulders shook. 'I'm sorry if I'm not natural,' she said in a stifled voice. 'You'll have to take me as I am.'

'Lily—darling!' Trevannion sat up, distressed. 'I didn't mean . . . you know I didn't mean——'

'Well be quiet, then. Don't let's have any more about it not being right for us to be married.' She pulled away her hand, fished in her knickers for her handkerchief, and blew her nose. 'I'm going to marry you, whether you like it or not, so you may as well make up your mind to it.'

Then she lay against him, her head on his shoulder, and they went on making plans. With one of those sudden changes which amused and delighted Trevannion, Lily

began to tease him, and ask how they would live, now that he had given up his frauds and swindles.

Trevannion laughed. 'My dear. There's no difficulty about making an honest living. It's dishonesty that takes the brains. Successful dishonesty. That's real hard work. Any fool can make an honest living.'

'Can you?'

'You watch me, and see.'

'You'd better. I want lots of nice things. Nice clothes. Nice furniture.'

'You shall have them, my pet.'

'Flowers. Bought ones, not only those you have in gardens.'

'Where do you think the bought flowers grow? In shops?'

'You know perfectly well what I mean.'

'Well, you shall have everything you want. And quite a few things you've never thought of wanting.'

'How do you know what I want?'

'You'll soon tell me, I've no doubt.'

He told her how he wanted her to have all the things she had missed. He dilated on clothes, and shoes, and fancy underwear. Lily giggled.

'There was a picture of some of those in a magazine. I showed it to Miss Balgannon, and asked her if she would like some. She was shocked.'

'Poor old trout. Not she. She'd have loved 'em.'

The idea of a trout in underwear set Lily off, and Trevannion could get no more sense out of her.

He spent a happy day, and the doctor, looking in at the end of his day's round, was delighted with him. He slept well, and was awake and in excellent spirits when Lily called him in the morning.

Confronted with his breakfast, he rubbed his hands, and made so many preliminary noises of enjoyment that Lily remonstrated with him. Their positions had become reversed. Trevannion was the child, and she the elder. His illness had made this natural, and he now played it as a game with her.

She was away from him some twenty minutes, seeing to

Miss Balgannon's breakfast, and answering the door to tradesmen. It was a source of bitter self-reproach to her afterwards that during this time she had no trace of mis-giving. The quick telepathic *rapport* she had developed with Trevannion failed her altogether. She was gay, she sang to herself, she laughed and joked with the milkman. Then she went in to see how Trevannion was getting on, and whether he wanted anything.

The tray was on the floor, the breakfast things scattered. A roll, untouched, had come as far as the door. Trevannion lay unconscious, his face horribly distorted, his breathing a soft, thick snore.

The doctor came quickly, though the wait seemed hours to Lily. A glance at her face as she let him in told him that he need fear no trouble about telling her what he expected to find. Her eyes were dull and without hope. She stayed outside when he went into Trevannion's room.

He was not long. He came out, grave, kindly, quiet, and took her by the arm. She hardly heard what he said, at first. He spoke of 'the terminal event', and presently was telling her what she knew; that Trevannion had had another stroke, more violent than the first, and would not survive it.

Lily could not look at the doctor. She forced a question from her lips.

'How long?'

'Impossible to say. But—not long.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, her voice harsh and cracked. 'Weeks? Days? Hours?'

He pressed her arm. 'I think—hours.'

'Will he . . . wake up at all?'

'Again, I don't know. Even if he does, he won't be able to speak or move.'

Lily shivered, and longed that both Trevannion and she would be spared that last agony. But, when it came, as it did only a couple of hours after the doctor had left, it was no agony for her. If her accord with Trevannion had failed during those twenty minutes when she was out of his room, it returned now, and she knew the feelings and thoughts in his mind even more clearly than when he had been able to

speaking them. Now, at the last, he was in all ways her child: totally helpless: unable to express anything except by the tears that now and then ran from his left eye. This eye alone he could move a little: and, as she came and went about his bed, it followed her in agonised entreaty.

By degrees, as she found that she understood—for she talked to him continually, in her low, pleasant voice, talked almost gaily, as if nothing were the matter, as if this were a temporary mishap, laughable even. He might have been a small boy who had fallen into a muddy ditch, and lay in bed while some kind and reassuring grown-up dried and cleaned his clothes, so that he should get no scolding when he went home—by degrees the anguished tension of his mind relaxed. Spasms of panic seized it, when he would stream with sweat, panic at the unknown and at leaving her: but they decreased, and he fell into a calm, until the edges of his mind began to float and dream. The part of him that was aware was spreading: it spread beyond the confines of the room, back into his childhood, out into the town with its busy High Street and its morning shoppers, far away into places he had never seen. Then, at a sound, or some happening in the body that no longer responded to him, his consciousness would contract, and he would be back in the room, and see Lily bending over him, or ministering in some way to that hulking senseless lump, his body.

So he lay, calm, drifting, his lips set in a grin, as if he were reflecting on the irony of what had happened. At last, after so many wasted years, he was fit to live: and he must go. He pitied himself, in his clear moments, and the tears spilled from his one good eye and dribbled down his cheek to wet the pillow: but one fear was stilled for ever. He would not now harm Lily, or hamper her life. Still, in spite of all she had said, and although he knew deep within him that as long as he lived her happiness lay with him, he could not help thinking of their position as it must seem to the world. Ah well; whoever was right, he need not bother with it any longer.

As the day passed, his dreams grew, his periods of return

were fewer and more blurred. Presently he could not tell one from the other. Lily floated in and out of a phantasmagoria that was part peaceful, part beautiful, and sometimes vexatious and terrifying. At about ten past five, when she spoke to him, Lily thought he heard, and by a flicker of his eyelid tried to respond. After that he was unconscious.

All through the evening hours and those of night Lily sat with him. She would not go, though she knew that he was no longer there. Nothing was left but the deranged machine, the gross body that still clung, with brutish primeval obstinacy, to its animal life. The doctor, looking in once more at half-past nine, offered to send a nurse so that Lily might rest.

'Now that he's lasted as long as this,' he told her, 'he may go on for hours.'

But Lily would not move. Every now and then, as the quarters took wing from St. Asaph's bell, she fell into a doze. At last, waking from a dream in which she and Trevannion set off gaily in a train to Newton St. Bastable, and then found themselves in green fields, picking flowers, she glanced guiltily at the clock. Twenty past three.

No change on the bed. Trevannion still snored on. His face had altered so much that she could hardly bear to see it. More than once she had changed the position of her chair, in the attempt to find an angle from which he still looked like himself. From where she now sat, discoloured though he was, and with his mouth wide open, he was still recognisable. It was better not to go close, for the interior of the mouth was brown and parched, the eyes were slits of white, and the smell of dissolution exhaled from his stricken bulk. There was nothing to be done. The doctor had said he could not recover consciousness, even for a moment.

She went to the bed, and touched him.

'Trev. Trev. My darling.'

Her voice was low, violent with the will to reach him. It seemed to her he must hear. But there was no flicker, no change in the steady labouring snore.

She went back to her chair. Maybe already his spirit was

standing beside her, a hand on her shoulder, watching almost with amusement the struggling husk that would not give up its breath. She saw him young, as in a photo he had shown her once, young and debonair, with whiskers as well as his big moustache, and the picture developed in her mind, with herself in the costume of the period, hands in her lap, head modestly inclined downwards—

She jumped. She had dozed off again. Something had waked her. Yes—the breathing had changed its rhythm. It was irregular now, stopping, starting, stopping again. Her heart beating wildly, she stood by the bed, feeling she ought to do something. She had been calm for hours, almost beyond grief. She had got used to this vigil. She hardly seemed able to remember anything before it. It might have lasted half a lifetime. It was another phase of her life with Trevannion, she had adjusted herself to it as to all the previous phases, and now the idea that it should cease threw her into an agony of panic. She heard her own loud sobbing mingled with the sounds from the bed, the choking starts, the harsh, laboured rattle, the silence so sharp and long it seemed nothing could start again, and then once more the awful indrawn rasp, as the body made yet another effort to keep going.

While she looked, dry-eyed, the face changed, as if what was below it moved and fell away. There was a sudden loud choke: the heart made a desperate leap: then, almost like a natural breath, there came a long, uneven sigh; and stillness.

It was the stillness that was frightening, not the fact of death which it proclaimed. For the moment, Lily hardly realised that. All she knew was that the sounds, which, dreadful though they were, had been company for her, had gone away and left, not nothing, but an active, menacing, crowding thing, a stillness that pressed on her from every side, as if she were in dark, cold water, wave upon wave of soundless, absolute negation, a terror distilled from every nightmare she had known.

With an effort that felt as if it tore her apart, Lily clasped her hands and prayed. For an unreckonable moment she

and the invading darkness were poised one against the other. Then there was a gleam as of silver, releasing the flood of life and light; the darkness fell back, great surges of warmth rose from her feet, she had an illusion of hearing, for a second or two, the singing of innumerable birds; and she was back in the warm room, fearless, compassionate, beside the body of her dear one, now set free.

She kneeled by his bed, and said a prayer. Without thinking, she said one she had said ever since she could remember: and the simplicity of the familiar words, which she had said so often, hugging a toy bear to her breast, released her tears. The strain of the illness, the responsibility, the cheerful face she had kept up lest he be worried, the ache of waiting, and these last hours, were all dissolved in the healing flow, and she was a child again.

St. Asaph's chime came in at the window, sounding the four quarters, and then, from the flat, broken bell, clanked out the hour of four.

5

Trevannion looked very different when Lily next saw him. She had slept for several hours, dropping out of life to a depth so great that, when she returned, she had no memory of life at all, and did not know who she was or what she was perceiving. Even when she recognised her room, bright with sunlight, she did not remember what had happened. It took many seconds for the last events to re-instate themselves in her mind.

The remembrance gave her a faint stab of pain, but no more. Even after her sleep she was numb. But such feeling as she had was changed. The sense that Trevannion had gone, which held her when she was watching his long struggle, had left her. He was much nearer now than when his body lay there choking and snoring. Now she felt him all around her. And he was still in his room. They had not yet taken him away.

She had not the power yet to see that these two thoughts were on such different levels that one contradicted the other. With a feeling that was almost excitement, she dressed, and

went to Trevannion's room. At the door a tremor shook her, for fear she should find something changed and unrecognisable. Then, saying to herself 'Aren't I silly?' she opened the door.

She did not immediately glance at the bed, but went straight to the curtains and pulled them back. The blind was down too: that was why the room was so dark. Clicking her tongue—Trevannion never drew the blind—she pulled the cord, and it flew up with a snap.

'Good morning, my darling.'

Did she say the accustomed words, or only think them? Smiling tremulously, she turned to look at the bed.

There lay on it, not Trevannion, but a magnificent effigy. That was her first thought: someone had taken him away, and substituted this model. Then, coming closer, she saw that it was indeed Trevannion, but younger, unmarked by time. He looked perhaps forty, even less; and then she saw you could not put an age to him.

The face, a waxen, ivory yellow, wore an expression of eternal calm. It told of escape from time. There was nothing frightening about its stillness. Gazing down at it, Lily had a sensation as if a single note from a bell had rung and continued to be heard, not as an echo or an overtone, but because she was with it for ever in the eternal moment of its sounding. The dead still face told of forgotten mysteries. Simple and clear, they were within her reach, until she tried to reach them. A fragment of the endless flow of life had stopped and, isolated, told its secret. Lily heard, and knew that she had heard, and knew that the knowledge must stay where it was until some crisis bring her back to it. It could not cross from one world to another, but faded like steam in the bright air; and the moment passed.

Intensely conscious of her own body, of its weight upon her feet, the blood in her fingertips, her armpits and the live warm skin all over her, Lily bent nearer and scrutinised the face. There was no sign of distortion, except that one corner of the mouth was a little open, showing the teeth, and giving the effect of a faintly sardonic smile. The purse who had laid him out had put back his false teeth, but had

either left it a little too late or failed to get them perfectly in place. The result, though small and unnoticeable unless one looked closely from that side, was unlike any expression Trevannion had worn in life.

Lily gave a little, inward laugh, and stepped back from the bed. This wax image—it wasn't Trev at all. How silly! Her spirit was lightened, and the feeling that Trevannion was all around her came back like fresh warmth to her body. It persisted: throughout that day and the next, she kept talking to him in her mind. It was a secret they shared. He was there with her, all the time, and the others knew nothing about it.

So strong was the feeling, so closely did it enfold her, that no grief could as yet come near her. She had Trevannion now, within herself, united to her as never before. It was an exaltation, and could not last, but for the time it mercifully upheld her.

XVIII

TREVANNION'S funeral partook of the same dubious nature as his life. It had the unclassifiable quality that had so irritated Mrs. Bracegirdle. He was given almost, but not quite, a civic funeral. The Mayor of Dycer's Bay attended, supported by the Town Clerk, and spoke an oration, but he did not wear his chain, and so was not committed in his official capacity. (This was his second term of office. His re-election had evoked from Trevannion a great deal of unsavoury comment and surmise.)

A number of the townspeople turned out, in spite of the weather, but few of them could be described as mourners. Trevannion's death was a relief to them, so real that they were glad to attend his funeral as a thank-offering. He had known far too much about them for their peace of mind. Now that the danger was gone, they felt almost cordial towards his memory.

The Reverend Mr. Dilgall, who conducted the service, had less reason for relief, in that his debt had been forgiven while Trevannion was still alive. As the first-fruits of his amendment, Trevannion had reviewed, with Lily, the more flagrant of the immoral obligations by which his fellow-citizens were bound to him, and had discharged them. If Mr. Dilgall at all rejoiced in the passing of his creditor, it could only be because he felt that nobody but himself was left to forget a speculation which his parishioners might judge unworthy in a minister of the Gospel.

Lily and Miss Balgannon were in deepest black. Miss Balgannon had been unexpectedly positive, collaborating with Lily in the arrangements, and insisting that all should be done in the best possible style, and at her expense. She seemed to be truly grieved, and to have laid away all memory of the difference between Lily and herself. She cried in a subdued way at the funeral, and rasped Lily's nerves by her sniffing. Otherwise, Lily felt cold and far away. All this was what Trev would have called a nonsense.

It bore no relation to him, or to her, or to anything real. It was stupid and ugly. Even the noble words of the service could scarcely gleam through Mr. Dilgall's moist and muffled utterance.

The little company from 'The Peace' was there, Walter with a black tie and an armband, Stan holding a borrowed black hat which he could not put on because it did not fit him, and the Mountaineer with a crape band strangely affixed to his tweed deer-stalker. He had wished to tie a black bow to his Alpenstock, alleging that it was the custom in Swiss mountain villages, but public opinion had been against him, and he had been overruled into leaving his unwieldy adjunct at home. Joe Blake was there, dislike of emotion making him scowl and look angry. George Dubidge, attending professionally as driver, stood holding his chauffeur's cap, his red face puckered with distress. Captain Higson, arriving late in uniform, represented his wife, who was kept indoors by a cold. Her first for many years, she attributed it with playful acerbity to the hazards of the married state. Among the few ladies present was the elder daughter of Mrs. Wishart. Seizing an opportunity for drama, she spent the time between imagining affectionate scenes between her and her mother's one-time lodger, and assuming a look of intense grief in the hope that she would be remarked.

The Mayor's speech was short. The wind blew cold, the graveside was in an exposed place, and there were signs that another shower was approaching.

'The deceased gentleman,' he proclaimed, 'although he held no civic office, could almost be called a public character. Everyone in Dycer's Bay knew him, and with good reason.'

At this point the Town Clerk coughed, and the Mayor, realising that he was on delicate ground, moved quickly off it.

'A man of great ability, whose talents must have found recognition in a wider sphere, he nevertheless elected to remain among us and give us the full benefit of his powers. That fact alone should entitle him to our grateful

remembrance. But, more than that, there was the nature of his work amongst us.'

The Town Clerk coughed again, and the Mayor, with an apprehensive glance at the now imminent shower, made brief allusion to Trevannion's work for the Dycer's Bay Widows' and Orphans' Assurance Society, and managed to represent him both as a dispenser of benevolence and an apostle of thrift.

'I can confidently aver,' he raised his voice—and Walter, recalling Trevannion's description of him as always on his oath, smiled crookedly and failed to hear the concluding sentences.

Then the shower came down, with a hiss and rattle of sleet, and the ceremony was finished as fast as decency allowed.

2

It was a small, forlorn party that gathered in 'The Peace' that night. There was little business in the main bar, and presently Joe came in to sit with them.

Walter uttered the thought they were all thinking.

'Well,' he said. 'It's going to seem queer, without Trev.'

George heaved a deep sigh.

'Ar,' he concurred. 'That it is. Miss 'im bad, we will.'

'You couldn't but like him,' Walter went on. 'He was grand company. And yet, you know, there wasn't much to admire about him.'

There was a shocked silence. He raised his head.

'Well, come now: was there? Be honest about it.'

'I liked 'im,' Stan said stubbornly. 'I liked 'im very well.'

'So did I,' Walter rejoined quickly. 'I was very fond of him. But I didn't admire him. At least, not till the end. He could be very selfish. And cruel. And bitter.'

'Ar,' George admitted. 'He 'ad a sharp tongue, there's no denyin'.'

'He had. And he could find out your weak point, to use it on.'

'E treated me very well,' Stan said, looking doggedly at

a spot on the floor. 'You won't get me to say a word against 'im.'

'It isn't a question,' Walter began to explain, 'of saying anything against him. I was only——'

He broke off, as the Mountaineer raised his hand, like a bishop giving a blessing.

'*De mortuis,*' he intoned, '*nil nisi bonum.* I am surprised at you, Walter. I thought you were his friend.'

'I was his friend, as much as any of you.' He swilled the last of his beer round in the glass. 'It's a funny notion, that because a chap is your friend you've got to pretend he's perfect. You like a man, faults and all, don't you? Yet you won't admit he's got any. I knew Trev as well as any of you. Better, maybe. I went to see him several times while he was ill. He'd changed, as much as I've ever seen a man change, yet he was the same Trev we all were fond of. I didn't like him less for it: I don't know that I liked him more. Well, yes, perhaps, a bit, because he was humbler. You could come closer to him. He'd changed—and it was that young girl that did it. He'd found someone he could really care for.'

George shook his head.

'It didn't seem right to me, a young girl like that. Not with a man Trev's age, it didn't.'

'It did *him* all the good in the world. That's something to its credit.'

'Something to *'er* credit,' Stan corrected, breathing heavily. 'She'd do any chap good.'

Walter looked at him in warm approval. He had been regretting the theme, for Stan's sake, as soon as he had started. Stan was coming on.

The Mountaineer cleared his throat.

'Disparity in years,' he said, in a high, rather clerical tone, 'is not invariably a bar to harmony. It can be a very good thing, in some cases.'

Walter realised, sympathetically, that the Mountaineer thought Miss Jones to have been much younger than she was.

'I reckon it was a good thing this time,' he agreed. 'And

it would have continued so, if they'd got married. Only that wasn't to be.'

'It's queer,' George said, shaking his head, 'ole Trev dyin' like that, just when he was set fair, as you might say.'

Walter leaned forward, his forehead rising in a net of wrinkles.

'It's my belief that was what killed him.'

'Wot was?'

'The whole business. Loving the girl. Being loved. Altering his whole way of life. He had, you know. All sorts of his little tricks he'd given up. It was a big turn-round, for a man of his age, who'd lived in one way for so long: and I reckon it was too much for him.'

They sat silent, trying to assimilate an idea so novel to them. Joe, whose mind had caught on something earlier, addressed Walter.

'Little tricks?' he said. 'What do you mean, little tricks?'

'I don't know half nor quarter of them,' Walter replied. 'Trev kept pretty close about his business affairs.' He smiled. 'But one he did tell me. He used to put an advertisement in the paper, about how to cure a red nose, and to send fivepence in stamps. Stacks of people wrote, and asked. Know what his answer was? "Go on drinking till it turns blue."'

Stan's eyes goggled.

'E wrote that back to 'em?'

'That's right.'

'Cor!'

George suddenly went off into a high cackle of laughter.

'What a go!' he exclaimed. 'Comical, ain't it?'

'Cor,' Stan said again. 'Didn't none of 'em come after 'im, and give 'im a doin'?''

'What, for fivepence? Not worth it. And if anyone had, Trev would have talked him round. In five minutes, the chap would have been standing him a drink.'

George uttered another cackle.

'Sorry,' he gasped. 'I didn't ought to, I know. But—you got to laugh.'

Walter tilted his head back, and looked at him from narrowed lids.

'Laugh all you can, George. We shan't have so much to laugh at, from now on.' He turned to Joe. 'Fill 'em up, 'This one's on me.'

The glasses were filled, and handed round. They held them, waiting for Walter.

'Well,' he said. 'Here's to Trev.'

'Trev,' they said to each other, clinking glasses. 'Trev.' And they drank.

3

It was a mild April evening, six weeks after Trevannion's death, and Stan was having his tea with Lily in the kitchen.

Life at 'The Beeches' had quietly resumed its rhythm, and was now as in the days before Trevannion came to live there. After the funeral Lily had fallen into a deep depression, in which she drooped listlessly, refused to eat, forgot her work, and seemed to have no hold on life. In this emergency Miss Balgannon discovered an unexpected strength. She was kind and steadfast, she looked after Lily without too much fuss, until at last one evening the girl collapsed into her arms in a flood of tears. Miss Balgannon wept too, clinging to her and uttering broken murmurs of condolence, and the tears washed away the last of their estrangement. From that moment the two women were united in their grief for the man they had both loved. They mourned him together, and they mourned each for the other's loss as well as her own.

The reconciliation broke open Lily's frozen trance, and from that day, with the healthy resilience of youth, she began to mend. One morning she caught herself singing as she dusted Miss Balgannon's bedroom, and broke off, with a feeling of guilt. But her animal spirits won, and soon she could sing without feeling it was treason to her darling.

And Stan, sitting there in the kitchen, dangling his empty cup by the handle between his big red hands, slow, plain, honest Stan was more of a comfort to her than she would admit. No one could ever be to her what Trev had been.

Such a thing could only happen once. But Stan's faithfulness, for which she had always been grateful in a half-conscious, unacknowledged way, had a new value for her now. His presence, unexacting and peaceful, was just what she needed. She was in a state that was neither grief nor pleasure, resembling the blessed calm that follows pain, in which one hardly dares draw a full breath for fear the pain return, then slowly realises that it has indeed gone, and breathes deeply, thankfully. Later, her forces would come back to her, and she would start a new life. A nature essentially sound, like Lily's, can turn to good almost anything that happens to it. Trevannion's lingering dread that he should harm her would never be realised: that possibility he had redeemed. The meeting with him had been part of her destiny, and in the end she would draw from him a benefit as great as he had drawn from her. She had given birth to a new life. Trevannion at the last was more her child than if she had borne him.

Later, maybe, she would come to a more normal fulfilment. Stan reckoned himself small beer after Trevannion, but he was near Lily in age, and his love and understanding of her belonged to the future as well as to the present and the past.

In his own phrase, Stan had prospects.

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